Understanding The Challenges and Ways in Which High School Principals Lead For All

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ABSTRACT

UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGES AND WAYS IN WHICH HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS LEAD FOR ALL

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Northern Illinois University, 2022
Benjamin Creed - Director

This dissertation examines the complexities of equity work in suburban high schools and the challenges in leading this work as a high school principal. It is organized into three separate parts. Paper 1 is a review of the literature defining equity, examining equity of what, and delving into the many reasons there is resistance to this work. All three topics are interrelated and help to understand why creating schools that work for all students has become increasingly challenging and the most important work that we, as educators, must focus on to truly serve our students. Paper 2 is an analysis of the interviews conducted with 13 high school principals who were asked questions pertaining to their vision of school leadership as well as their view of equity in schools and how to move that work forward. They shared their experiences, successes, and challenges with both their roles and how they work to better serve all students. Paper 3 is an overview of a professional development workshop geared toward high school principals. This professional development workshop merges the information in Papers 1 and 2 and pairs it down to the information to help the leaders move equity work forward in their buildings. The overview of this professional development details the rationale and components of each segment of the session. It is accompanied by a slide deck that will be used for this professional learning experience and to engage this audience of high school principals.
The purpose of these three papers, individually and collectively, is to help school leaders understand, navigate, and potentially overcome the resistance to any equity initiatives being implemented in their school buildings. The hope is that this information will also contribute to current research about this type of work, particularly in suburban high schools, which is lacking in the literature. The first paper contributes to this goal by providing an overview of the existing literature and an understanding of why resistance exists as well as the forms it takes in a school setting. Following this, the principal interviews provide first-hand accounts of the experiences and thoughts of 13 suburban high school principals who have been tasked with doing this work and are finding it challenging. By merging the findings from both papers, the professional development workshop outlined in the third paper carries this work forward by providing timely information they can immediately consider and implement.
NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
DE KALB, ILLINOIS

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UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGES AND WAYS IN WHICH HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS LEAD FOR ALL

BY
ALEXIA A. ELLETT
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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AND FOUNDATIONS

Doctoral Director:
Benjamin Creed
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Northern Illinois University’s Educational Leadership program has shown flexibility, responsiveness, and support throughout my time in this program. This began with David Snow and Dr. Kelly Summers, who provided continuous guidance as I transitioned from one department in NIU to this one. Their ability to create flexible scheduling and provide ample support throughout was amazing and greatly appreciated. All of my professors in this program have been phenomenal as well, starting with my first class with Dr. Kerry Burch and then later courses with Dr. Benjamin Creed and Dr. Cynthia Taines. Their expertise is an invaluable part of this program and any student’s experience. I am incredibly grateful they are leading this dissertation process as my committee chairs. Each of them provides varied and valuable insights that have pushed my thinking, challenged my understanding, and provided a well-rounded and rigorous experience that will serve me well, both personally and professionally. A special thanks to Dr. Creed who met with me on a regular basis to guide, counsel and encourage me to the finish line. His patience and persistence are greatly appreciated.

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and not feel like a failure as a parent, thank you. And to my friends who are family, thank you for your encouragement and support. All of you are amazing cheerleaders, and I am so thankful for you.

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To Aubrey, Brynn, and Devyn, right now you probably just think that mom is working on another random work project, which in some ways is true. One day, my hope is that you love learning and love what you do, but through it all, you realize that nothing is more important than family. While it took me 11 years to complete this degree, I hope you know that you should push through to finish something if you want to do it. Thank you for being patient with me. Being your mom and getting to be a part of your journey is by far my greatest joy and accomplishment.

And lastly, to all of the working moms out there. Nothing about being a working parent is easy, but you can do it, too, even if you have to take time off and go back years later. It is not how long it takes to get it done; it is that you get it done. This advice got me through.
DEDICATION

To any individual, in any capacity, who tries to make a difference in the lives of all students.
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INTRODUCTION

As I have pondered my dissertation over the past couple of years, one central thought has resonated with me: I wanted to learn something that can immediately affect and enhance my ability, and others’ abilities, to create more equitable schools and educational experiences for our students. Through my school and work experiences, studies, and candidacy exams, I have searched for examples of equity initiatives that were successfully implemented – not just in opportunity but also in impact. Schools may tout programming that bridges students to higher levels of learning or closes the gap with discipline practices, but do those programs actually work and what is their impact? Do they make a difference? Especially today, as any equity initiative is met with a range of emotions and heightened feelings—sometimes from even just saying the word equity, so how do schools and school leaders resist the resistance?

For the purpose of this study, my goal was to hone in on schools with similar demographics to Wheaton North – predominantly white, public, suburban high schools. While every school, no matter the demographics or location, is met with challenges facilitating equity work, there are challenges unique to schools like Wheaton North: schools that have ample facilities, resources, and programs, and that for a long time only geared those, whether intentionally or unintentionally, to the privileged white students who walked their halls. Since I am in an administrative position and one who has worked with our team to make our school more equitable over the past 15 years, I wanted to narrow my focus to the work of school
leaders, specifically high school principals, who set the tone for the equity work in their entire building through both their words and actions – or lack thereof.

Overview: Context

As a student teacher and teacher in an urban Rialto, California, school that was racially diverse and predominantly comprised of students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds in for the first six years of my teaching career, everything was a stark contrast from my schooling experiences growing up in Glen Ellyn: larger class sizes, fewer resources, more discipline issues, less support staff, the list goes on. School leaders were managers, constantly putting out fires and dealing with disciplinary issues. As true with any learning environment, if teachers could not manage or control their classroom setting, learning did not take place. In this learning environment, due to the lack of support, it was difficult for a teacher to get the class under control once control was lost. Similar to trends across the nation, students wanted to learn but did not always come in ready to learn, sometimes reading years below grade level and lacking support both in school and at home to catch up. There were high rates of teacher turnover and burnout to compound this. In comparing this school to mine growing up, the disparities in our educational system became immediately obvious and seemed incredibly unjust. At that time, equity, systemic racism, and privilege were not words I could have placed with the what and why. I just knew that the differences were extreme and unfair, and, upon reflection years later, I realized that this was where my understanding of equity in education really began. Fast forward to present day, I am now in my fifteenth year at Wheaton North High School, which is predominantly white and economically diverse. Students can count on prepared teachers, layers of support staff, smaller class sizes, and outstanding facilities – a stark contrast from my
experience in Rialto. I clearly remember walking the building with the principal after my interview at Wheaton North, having flown in from California, in hopes that this opportunity might get me back home closer to friends and family. I felt a huge sense of guilt observing the facilities, resources, and programs these students had – and that I had growing up – compared to my students back in Rialto. It simply was not fair. Not knowing to ascribe these feelings to white guilt or privilege, I just knew that if my students back in California had what these students did how much better served, supported, and prepared they would be. During my first year at Wheaton North, observing classes in the R, I, and A level tracks brought the inequities that were not as obvious in the initial building walkthrough even more to light. The regular-level classes housed most of our minority and struggling students, while the advanced-level classes were predominantly, if not all, white. The segregation within the school was difficult to deny, yet everyone was accustomed to and seemed comfortable with the practices that recommended and maintained primarily BIPOC students in those tracks throughout their four years of high school.

In March of 2017, a writer from Education Week reached out to my principal at Wheaton North High School to highlight our school in a piece about bridging the opportunity gap, specifically how a predominantly white suburban school had increased the number of students, racially and socioeconomically, taking AP classes and maintaining the same level of scores. Our district had recently been recognized by the College Board for the same reason. Catherine Gewertz, the writer from EdWeek, not only wanted to interview our principal but also had the opportunity to interview a multitude of students and staff over the course of her visit. While it was a great opportunity to highlight the work and accomplishments of our school by someone from outside of our district, it ended up revealing more work that needed to be done on the inside: “Wheaton North is like thousands of other high schools across the country, replicating
along its polished hallways the inequities that mark the daily lives of minority and low-income students beyond the school’s big glass doors. Studies show, in fact, that achievement gaps within schools can be greater than those from school to school” (Gewertz, 2017, p. 2). This article took the equity efforts that had been scattered throughout the past decade and brought this focus front and center, highlighting the work that needed to be done both purposefully and systemically moving forward.

Part of the reason that Wheaton North had been successful in increasing AP enrollment was due to our summer bridge programs. With the removal of our lower-level track in 2009 and the implementation of these bridge programs, over time Wheaton North was able to increase its AP enrollment. While the numbers told a story of more inclusiveness in this program, walking into those classrooms and talking with teachers revealed how much more of the work needed to be done. As Gewertz (2017) pointed out in her article “The Challenge of Creating Schools that ‘Work for Everybody’”:

More than a quarter of Wheaton North students take AP classes—an accomplishment that puts the school in rarefied air nationally. But only 16 percent of those seats hold minority students, even though nonwhites make up 31 percent of the student body [...] At Wheaton North, there are three levels of classes: intermediate, or “I-levels,” the default track, yet still considered college-prep; advanced, or “A-levels,” and Advanced Placement. Low-income and minority students are overrepresented in I-level classes and underrepresented in AP classes. (p.2).

While we took pride in eliminating our lower-level track six years prior to this article being written, there still was a lot of work that needed to be done with our curricular programming. Removing the lower-level track was only one step in the right direction. We needed to look at the student makeup in not just AP programming but also in all of our programming and courses as a whole.
Schools are aware of the research around tracking and how creating levels for courses increases the opportunity gap, revealing systemic biases and racism within the school system. Through closer examination, this gap is apparent, as one understands the recommendation and course-selection processes that start before students even enter our school system. Even though the evidence is overwhelmingly against tracking, schools across the country have yet to follow suit with full-scale detracking efforts, and one is left to ask why, which tends to unveil responses with many layers and issues beneath the surface. This is similar to how the elimination of the lower-level track was no easy feat at Wheaton North and was met with much resistance from teachers and the community. Eleven years later, there are still teachers who occasionally suggest the desire to bring back that lower-level track, stating that it would better meet the needs of some of our students, even though there is ample evidence that students are successful, with most meeting and surpassing the academic expectations in the higher college preparatory track.

It is interesting to examine the impact de-tracking has on both adults and students in our building. With the adults, there was a lot of resistance. The teachers of the lower-level tracks deeply believed that by providing modified curriculum, expectations, and experiences, students were better served and more successful. There were teachers in tears during the de-tracking discussions as if by eliminating the lower-level track the school was doing a huge disservice to students, even though those classes on a student transcript would not provide access to four-year colleges and universities. While all of these teachers cared deeply and wanted to do what was best for students, they had a difficult time seeing how the overall success in that program would not bring as much success beyond the walls of high school and would limit the college and career options for these students. Elimination of the lower-level track was a big step in the right direction, but it was only one step. Two tracks still remain, and the racial and economic
disparities between the two, while improved, are still quite distinct. And whether it is tracking, building programs to bridge students into AP classes, embedding restorative justice practices, or providing training on implicit bias, the resistance is still there and stalls progress, which impacts all of our students. One could make the case that with the political climate over the past few years and the pandemic, the resistance is at its highest point yet.

Over time and through conversions with staff, it is clear that part of this resistance stems from confusion about what equity work is and what it entails, which is further complicated by issues that our country is experiencing and that our world has experienced since the spring of 2020. There has been a lot of confusion and resistance to Black Lives Matter and other social justice efforts in our society. Unfortunately, because of these social unrest and justice issues, equity work, for some, has been aligned with a liberal agenda and viewed as a zero-sum game in which some students receive advantages while others are disadvantaged as a result. Interestingly, that mindset is more reflective of our current state and the need for equity work rather than in contrast to it. As educational leaders, we have been met with strong pockets of resistance that, at times, have impeded and compromised this work. We have tried to join all stakeholders and move this work forward, but it has been difficult to figure out the best way to do so. Staff buy-in is important and you do not want to leave anyone behind, but if you wait for buy-in from all stakeholders, the work will never get done – or may not even start. This is compounded by how the political unrest and resistance to equity work across the country has now entered into our schools. It used to be where teachers and schools could, to a certain extent, protect students from some of these issues in that teachers could just close their doors and teach, but school leaders and teachers are now saying that is no longer the case. The personal experiences in Rialto and Wheaton are reflective of some of these feelings and experiences.
They are also reflected in literature regarding equity work and the resistance experienced on multiple levels when schools try to move the work forward. In talking with other administrators and teachers in neighboring schools, the struggles are the same: How schools combat that resistance to provide a well-rounded and inclusive educational experience for all students was the impetus for the purpose and central focus of this literature review and study.
Defining Equity

Schools across the country are focusing on equity work, but what does that really mean and what does it look like? Some perceive it as a new educational buzzword – another this, too, shall pass. Others feel that it is the most important work schools should do and that a focus on equity in education is long overdue. What makes this work unique from all other school movements is that it is not a program or initiative that is easy to identify, implement, and measure. Instead it seems intangible at times – something that sounds great when you talk about it, but once you get into it, it unearths layers of confusion, frustration, and resistance. Some talk of the difference between equity and equality as if through being able to differentiate between the two, the understanding is complete; however, that could not be farther from the truth, especially when it comes to closely examining and understanding what this multifaceted, complex, and imperative work is for schools to truly serve all students.

Removal of Barriers

The literature defines equity work in schools in a multitude of ways, primarily focusing on fairness and achieving equality for all or varying in the ways in which these efforts play out in a school setting. Some define equity as the path to achieve equality, but there are barriers in this path that are not always easy to identify and/or remove. As the literature suggests, to provide
students with equal opportunities, school policies need to focus on the removal of barriers, which according to Ward, Bagley, Lumby, Woods, Hamilton, and Roberts (2015) is one of the biggest challenges schools around the world face today:

Equity is thus theorised in neoliberal education policy documents as the ‘removal of barriers to engagement and achievement’ that might otherwise inhibit disadvantaged pupils’ ability to ‘participate, engage and succeed in various aspects of mainstream life’ rather than the radical revision of mainstream life. (p. 337)

This vision of equity work focuses on the ways to get all students to achieve and access opportunities in our system rather than a complete overhaul of the system itself. However, part of the system needs to be reworked to access these aspects of mainstream life. What equity work reveals is that the removal of these barriers is complex and multifaceted because it is not just about the barriers to engagement and achievement but also about ensuring all students, especially those from minoritized and lower socioeconomic backgrounds, are provided the opportunity and support to access every facet of our educational system. If the opportunities are still primarily composed of white and privileged individuals, then the impact of these barrier removals is ineffective and must be reexamined. To provide this support and impact, the social systems and roles of individuals must be examined as well. As Zhou, Cao, and Jacob. (2020) suggest

Seeing equity as a spectrum of socially just practices has the advantage of attending to both access and the more fundamental realms beyond access, such as social structures and cultural practices. However, to recognize the multifaceted dimensions of the justice-centered framework and enact socially just practices on the strong inclusion end of the spectrum, educators need to be critically conscious about the roles of individuals and social systems in equity. (p. 4)

To participate in equity work and to move it forward, there is a great deal of reflection and growth that educators need to make to examine their own biases and how their privilege has provided opportunities that have not been provided to others and subsequently are not provided to all students. Equity work is difficult because it must be done on personal, professional, and
systemic levels to be effective. Without this nuanced understanding and the desire and effort to move this work forward from educators, removal of these barriers to foster equality may become even more of an insurmountable task.

In schools across the country, there are obvious disparities in the educational system, some even within the same district, neighborhood, or hallway. Programming and educational opportunities vary greatly in schools, with those from higher-income areas that are many times predominantly white receiving access to higher quality buildings, instructors, programming, etc. Tuters (2017) states that

> equity is used to describe processes where individuals are working to achieve fair and equal opportunities for all students, based on their individual needs [...] helping students to overcome barriers to achievement such as discrimination and oppression based group membership and identity characteristics, and other barriers associated with things such as socio economic status and access to high quality educational programming and opportunities. (p. 49)

To remove these programming and opportunity barriers for students involves providing some students with more, or different, resources than others to bridge the gaps. Often these efforts are met with resistance, as they cause others to grapple with the idea that fairness is not always equal. To further illustrate this, Sampson (2019 suggests that

> this struggle [allocating resources] resembled a lack of understanding and commitment to the idea that achieving educational equity requires providing all students with equal opportunities. This often requires districts to provide some students with more and/or different resources to achieve higher levels of academic success. (p. 539)

This is also where the idea of equity is viewed, by some, as a zero sum game in that resources must be taken away from some to provide more for others. While that is not the case, it is difficult to correct that mindset through only talk. Instead people need to see it means that some students will receive different or more support to achieve the same opportunities rather than an opportunity is being taken away from some to give to others.
For schools and districts to do this work, it is imperative for educators to understand what equity is and why it is important. Equity work calls on educators to equip themselves with the knowledge and skills to help their students: “Equity requires that educators develop skills, knowledge, and beliefs necessary to meet the needs of every student, with an emphasis on students of color, English learners, students in poverty, and students with disabilities” (Sampson, 2019, p. 533). Placing an emphasis on some student groups over others requires all stakeholders to understand white privilege, implicit bias, and how our schools and country have created systems and structures that have historically disenfranchised many students. In recent years, many national media outlets have misconstrued this definition and work, confusing and sometimes enraging facets of our society. This understanding for schools, districts, and individuals to create equitable schools for all has become one of the greater barriers to this work.

As educators grapple with what equity is and how to do the work, researchers try to clearly define it as well. Another comprehensive definition of equity work in education is provided by Welton, Owens, and Zamani-Gallaher (2018):

Embarking on the change needed to achieve racial equity in education—or any change for that matter—is rather difficult, because it forces institutional members to call into question how the norms, practices, and routinization they have long grown comfortable with may in fact be the cause of racial inequities that are injurious to marginalized students, faculty and staff, and even surrounding community. (p. 2)

Equity work extends beyond the student level to all members of both the school and community. The idea that current and accepted practices and structures have been injurious to students and staff is not easy for some to come to terms with or perhaps acknowledge that they have, knowingly or unknowingly, participated in it and/or benefited from it. This is why it is
imperative that all stakeholders participate in ongoing equity training and professional
development so the work can impact every facet of the organization. Often equity work is also
referred to as social justice work and educational, or social justice, leaders must prepare for the
opposition they will face as they dismantle structures that privilege some and oppress others.
Pollack and Zirkel (2013) define this work:

We define social justice or equity-focused change efforts in schools as structural,
pedagogical, curricular, or procedural change initiatives that are intended to correct
identified disparities in educational opportunity or outcomes between groups of students.
These efforts are often thwarted when school leaders fail to anticipate this opposition and,
therefore, do not engage in preemptive efforts to manage it (p. 291)

To combat this opposition, school leaders need to clearly articulate what equity is and what the
work should look like in the schools. Without a solid foundational understanding of what equity
means, the work can easily be misconstrued or confused, which further complicates it and makes
combatting the resistance difficult to achieve. As mentioned previously, all school and
community members need to understand that equity means providing equal access to all
educational opportunities and, to do so, some students might need to receive more or different
types of support. While equity work focuses on access and opportunities for all students by
paying closer attention to those with unique learning or language needs, equity cannot be fully
attained without having a strong understanding of the influence of race and socioeconomic
status, which can also compound these learning or language needs. After understanding this
broader vision and definition, educators and leaders must delve into what this work looks like in
schools and determine how to measure progress with these efforts.
Equity of What

The literature states that equity influences everything: it is the lens through which educators must examine each facet of the school organization. As districts across the country begin and gain momentum with this work, the understanding of what it entails needs to be understood by all stakeholders. Lac and Baxley (2019) show how evidence in the research literature highlights how race and racism informs every facet of American life for K12 students: the funding of public schools, the disproportionate disciplinary infractions meted to Black children, and the Eurocentric textbooks and curriculum found in classrooms to name a few. (p. 36).

It is not just what is taught in the schools and the resources provided but also how students are instructed and engaged in their learning environment. Due to this, culturally responsive teaching and learning practices, along with restorative justice practices, have now been brought to the forefront of educational initiatives as schools attempt to address and rectify disparities. This work impacts all levels of educational institutions as the schools serve as a microcosm of our society and the greater complexity of equity work within it.

Research from the more long-standing field of science education has suggested that creating equitable learning environments involves valuing the students’ cultural experiences, aligning students’ cultural and linguistic resources with teaching practices, and interpreting knowledge in accordance with students’ cultural backgrounds. (Zhou, Cao, and Jacob, 2020, p. 2)

It is not only defining what must be considered but also who should be involved in the work. Therefore, in considering the equity of what, the what concept can entail everything from school financing and resources, academic and co-curricular programs, curricula, teachers, instruction, experiences, and representation. To fully grasp the work that needs to be done, all individuals impacted by the work must be a part of the process – not just students and teachers, but school leaders, support staff, parents, and community members as well. If the equity work is going to
be comprehensive and gain full momentum and support, it must involve everyone who impacts schools and students, and school communities must try to travel together. While there may be common ways in which this work can be approached, it will vary since schools differ from state to state and to city to neighborhood and stakeholders must consider the unique needs of the students, staff, and organizations within them.

**Equity Work and Social Justice Work**

Equity work is complex because it is social justice work. While the focus on this literature is related to the complexities and ways in which schools can become more equitable and better serve all students, it is part of a larger body of social justice work. Schools play a significant role because of the influence they have on students and on our society, but they are just one system to analyze when trying to find ways to make our society more just and able to work for all members. Because education is part of a much greater system, as educators examine ways in which schools perpetuate inequities and who they oppress, they must also recognize that there are multiple ways in which one student, or groups of students, may have the educational system work against them, creating and compounding barriers to access all of the opportunities schools and society has offer. This idea is brought up in the literature through the understanding of intersectionality:

Intersectionality is a form of resistant knowledge developed to unsettle conventional mindsets, challenge oppressive power, think through the full architecture of structural inequities and asymmetrical life opportunities, and see a more just world [...] Psychology’s recent increased interest in intersectionality presents a valuable opportunity for the field to make social justice and equity more central agendas and to be at the forefront of calls for radical structural changes to promote the well-being of all people. (Rosenthal, 2016, p. 474)
Intersectionality focuses on the idea one may have to fight against multiple forms of oppression at the same time. Because it deals with the well-being of individuals, schools must also provide the social-emotional support to students, especially those who have been impacted by multiple layers of oppression and disenfranchisement. The understanding of intersectionality can help educators to dismantle inequities as Rosenthal (2016) further suggests:

> The activist roots of intersectionality draws our attention to resistance either as a potential resilience factor or in addition to resilience factors. Attending to resistance can help us to better understand individuals and communities as actors responding to (and not just passively receiving) experiences of oppression, inequality, and stigma, and can help us to identify novel ways to intervene to improve well-being among those with these experiences. (p. 481)

Equity, or social justice, work intersects with many identities, forms, and systems of oppression. While the understanding of equity and what areas should be focused on with equity work are important to understand, to make any traction and positive gains, the leaders who are trying to pave the way for more equitable practices in schools must understand not only what they are working toward but also who and what they are working against. They also must be equipped with the tools and support to move this work forward and cannot do it alone. As Vue, Haslerig, and Allen (2017) suggest, this can happen through dialogue:

> The democracy-enhancing effects of cross-racial interactions and the potential for improved understanding of meaningful dialogues are compelling reasons for remedying institutional climate. This involves both the presence of structural diversity and interventions aimed at enhancing the quality of interactions. Thus continual reinvestments in such initiatives are important for affirming the democratic functions of higher education. (p. 895)

For leaders and schools to reinvest in and enhance this work on such a large and complex scale, they need to know how and must be supported not only when it progresses and is successful, but also, and especially, when it is not. These meaningful dialogues are fostered through purposeful, honest, and ongoing communication, and the pursuit of democratic ideals for all cannot be fully
attained until all members of the democracy are heard and understood and supported in doing this work. This should be the basis or foundation for all equity work in schools as engaging all voices is imperative to create a common understanding of why the work must be done and with such necessity.

**Impact of COVID-19**

With the COVID-19 pandemic, the idea of equity for our schools and for our country has been expanded. This global crisis and the way it has been dealt with has further exposed the systemic inequities prior to the pandemic and has created new ones, as Sullivan (2021) suggests in this piece:

The COVID-19 disaster is associated with a range of family and community stressors, as well as restricted educational opportunity given the effects of mitigation strategies on school functioning. As such, resultant challenges jeopardize students’ well-being and psychoeducational experiences. This has spurred fears for a lost generation because of the potential long-term effects for students’ educational and economic outcomes across their lifetimes. (p. 412)

As families have suffered with their health, finances, and wellbeing, how it directly impacts our students is evident, especially as schools have now returned to an in-person learning experience. Students are adjusting academically, behaviorally, and emotionally, even if their families were not as greatly impacted. Thus, for those who were, the negative impact of the pandemic was compounded, and our schools are struggling to meet these needs of all of our students as they transition back into our buildings on a regular basis. While they were remote learning, some for longer periods of time than others, Sullivan (2021) continues to point to the disparities in these learning experiences and how that may impact what she earlier defined as this lost generation due to the pandemic:
Home technology barriers are greatest among Black, Hispanic, low-income, and younger households, of which at least one-third lack consistent computer or internet access, reflecting existing technology gaps that become even more detrimental in the context of remote schooling. This has been recognized as a threat to students’ civil right to equal protection, making it a high-stakes, long-term social justice issue given not just the current centrality of students’ learning and well-being but also the indefinite reliance on remote schooling for medically vulnerable students and families’. (p. 412)

States have mandated that schools continue to provide a remote learning option for medically vulnerable students. Many schools have purchased online programs or have partnered with virtual schools to fulfill this need. When schools were fully remote or hybrid, live streaming into classrooms was the norm and at least allowed for kids to stay connected to their teachers, classroom, and each other. In both situations, it is difficult to replicate the traditional in-person school experience. While it might have been the best option then, we know that students struggled more than ever and those gaps, intensified by a variety of factors inside and outside of the school setting, will only widen some of the inequities our system has faced for years and are working to narrow or close. It is hard to gauge the extent of these gaps and inequities as we are still experiencing the pandemic, and research is already showing the trend is worrisome and potentially detrimental and that the effects will be lasting.

Factors that Influence Equity Work

Reoccurring in the literature about equity work in schools is the resistance prevalent throughout, whether it is from individuals, groups, organizations, or systems, it is present and is a constant hindrance to this work. Anyone who hopes to make progress with equity work and desires to provide more equitable learning environments for all students must be well prepared to resist the resistance that occurs inside and outside of the school building. Especially in our politically charged country, equity work is seen as divisive, that is as a zero-sum game where
because some are getting more to receive equal access, it must mean that others are having opportunities taken away, which is, in part, why this work faces pushback.

Positive and Negative Impacts of Legislation

Historically and through legislation, the pushback is evident. Over time legislation has laid the foundation for both equity in schools and the continuation of further inequities. In about half of the United States, there is a process for citizens to directly draft legislation, collect voter signatures, and certify proposals for a statewide ballot. A study by Farley (2018) categorizes education initiatives in the following ways: education rights initiatives, education finance initiatives, K-12 policy initiatives, education governance initiatives, and higher education policy initiatives. One of the findings of this study uncovered the following:

Among the 36 education rights initiatives identified in this study, 34 were also coded as anti-education rights initiatives, meaning they sought to eliminate or diminish the rights and educational opportunities of underrepresented students, including students of color, immigrants, women, and LGBTQ students. Only two of the education rights initiatives attempted to expand or secure the rights and opportunities of minoritized students. (pp. 14-15)

While most states do not allow individuals to initiate this legislative process, for those that do, the majority of the education policy initiatives work against providing equitable learning experiences for all of our students. The legislated resistance to equity is difficult and time consuming and, even when overturned, has already damaged schools and students as it was implemented. According to Farley (2018), research about these legislative patterns in limited but has increased in recent years:

While the total number of anti-education rights initiatives may seem small, it represents approximately 12% of the total number of education initiatives brought before voters. Moreover, that rate has risen: In the most recent 25 years of available data, anti-education rights initiatives accounted for more than 16% of the total education initiatives, or 24 of
142 total initiatives [...] The role of education is foundational in maintaining our democracy and moving our society forward, and any threat to equal opportunity must be regarded not only as a threat to underrepresented or minoritized students, but also as a serious threat to the fabric of our democracy. (pp. 20-22)

This is another powerful and influential resistance force that schools and individuals must work against to move equity work forward, one that jeopardizes democracy providing equal opportunities for all. The root of this legislative system must be examined further, and schools and our society needs to be educated more on not only the process itself but also how inequitable legislation has been passed. Those with power and privilege are using this direct drafting of legislation to disenfranchise and withhold educational rights from students and from some in our society.

**Politics of Equity Work**

On one level, resistance to equity work in schools is confounding when one considers the reasons most go into education: to help all students learn, grow, and reach their fullest potential. If systems are inequitable, it is impossible for all students to reach their fullest potential, so why are more people not working to correct it? In the past couple of years, equity has not only become an educational buzzword but has also been politicized. For educational leaders and teams to make equitable gains in their buildings, they need to understand why the resistance exists to effectively combat and overcome this resistance. Critical race theory is mentioned numerous times as a framework to understand equity work, the resistance to it, and how to move equity forward. Pollack and Zirkel (2013) share that

CRT also reminds us that change toward greater equity does not happen as a result of white people’s sudden realization of the unjustness of processes and structures that strongly favor them and increase their access to resources. Rather, CRT scholars point
out that equity-focused change has only occurred through interest convergence—that is, when the interests of white people were also served by change efforts. (p. 299)

While interest convergence has a positive connotation and infers compromise, what can happen as a result of interest convergence with equity work is that the end result does not close equity gaps to the extent they could or should and the compromise has the potential to create greater inequities. Furthermore, since CRT has recently become incredibly polarizing, exaggerated, and redefined by those who do not understand it, resistance has only mounted as a result.

This is clearly seen through a situation that took place at Berkeley High School in California. The school identified a need to eliminate required before and after school science labs, which directly impacted grades and graduation rates. With the proposal to return labs to the standard schedule and reallocate resources to better serve struggling students, community backlash and resistance occurred to where privileged parents, paired with resistant science teachers, fought to keep the lab time out of the school day to give their students more overall hours of science instruction and to make them more competitive with their post-high school plans. Because the school could not fight the dominant narrative that the privileged parents created, a compromise occurred that maintained the privilege for some, allocated fewer funds for struggling student resources, and actually created further inequities in access to advanced placement science courses. Pollack and Zirkel (2013) suggest that

we see, in the outlines of the Berkeley High School story, an iconic and all-too-familiar narrative of school change efforts: School leadership identifies a problematic area within the curriculum or pedagogy of the school; leadership proposes changing this aspect of the school with a goal to better serving all students; privileged members of the school—teachers, or more privileged parents, or both, who were well-served by the status quo—vociferously resist the change. Leadership eventually decides they need to back away from the proposed change. (p. 297)
In backing away from the original equity goal, the school compromised with the parents and resistant teachers, which resulted in less opportunity and access for the lower socioeconomic and minoritized students they set out to assist. This example at Berkeley High School illustrates one form of resistance in regard to programming and curriculum from privileged and predominantly white families and teachers who fought to keep, either consciously or subconsciously, institutionally racist and inequitable practices in place under the guise of opportunities being taken away from their students and given to less deserving students. These examples occur all over the country such as with the Willow Glen case study of teachers and their resistance to detracking efforts. Similar to the situation in Berkeley, teachers united with parents to fight the districts’ efforts and the court mandates: “These teachers either explicitly or implicitly classified children as low-, middle-, high-track students and frequently confounded those classifications with the students’ race, evidencing the types of normative views that inevitably undermine equity-minded reform efforts such as detracking” (Welner, 1999, p. 204). When it comes to leveling the playing field with access to higher-level curriculum and programming, schools experience resistance to those efforts by students and families who are most benefiting from them. Even though nothing is being taken away from the privileged students (they still have equal access to those classes and programs), the schools want to remain as gatekeepers. Through conversations about detracking, ideas about intelligence and race may surface from those who resist detracking or resist providing more access to educational programming, which further contributes to layers of resistance.
Racism and Equity Work

Another form of resistance surfaces in the form of colorblindness. For a period, people used the phrase colorblind in an attempt to say that they see all people equally, that race does not factor into their thoughts or actions, and that they are not racist. The intent from some seemingly well intentioned individuals of not acknowledging race and the struggles of minoritized groups undermines the non-white experience and confirms the ways in which the system and our society have created and maintained barriers for access to many forms of opportunities and advantages in school settings and beyond. As Vue, Haslerig, and Allen (2017) note:

The literature has documented how color blindness shapes intergroup relations and manifests in educational policy decisions around recruitment and retention of students of color. Color blindness also encourages individual rather than institutional explanations for inequality and racism and consequently is adopted and deployed by White Americans, who in turn benefit from colorblind discourse. (p. 869)

The colorblind mentality literally blinds people from seeing the ways in which systems and inequalities exist throughout our country and world. If ignored, the perspectives cannot be identified and fixed, which only exacerbates the inequities and promotes the colorblind narrative that has dominated the discourse in our country for quite some time and maintains the inequitable systems. Critical race theory “cautions against the uncritical acceptance of characterizations of this era as post-racial. The myth of a colorblind society operates as a master narrative that undermines the need for race-conscious policy” (Vue, Haslerig, & Allen, 2017, p. 871). The post-racial characterization is, in fact, racist in that it ignores and undermines the experiences of others and halts any progress in dismantling the structures that perpetuate racism. It allows white privilege to be maintained, which has already been proven a difficult form of resistance even when it is acknowledged: “White racial privilege has never been relinquished
voluntarily or without struggle. Instead, history has demonstrated that White privilege has been actively cultivated and vehemently guarded” (Vue, Haslerig, & Allen, 2017, p. 887). The vehement guarding of privilege creates master narratives that are difficult for individuals and schools to resist in trying to move forward equity work. In a study that shared the high school experiences of a group of young black women, this colorblind mentality suppresses important discussions about race that are necessary for real change to occur in schools:

Through the framework of critical race theory, Chapman (2013) examined the ways in which colorblind ideologies in suburban schools lead to the proliferation of racist schooling practices and impact the academic achievement of students of color who are prevented from engaging in explicit discussions of race in school. (Kelly, 2020, p. 449)

The colorblind mentality is yet another form of resistance that schools must identify, acknowledge, and dismantle so that they are prepared to confront resistance and move equity work forward. Even when schools identify systems or policies that carry this mentality, there is work the individuals who create and carry through these policies must do to acknowledge, understand, and work to correct these mindsets.

While the hope is that the teachers and leaders work to understand themselves and their roles more fully and model that work for our students, schools need to acknowledge that students, knowingly or unknowingly, participate in various forms of resistance, which is why they need to be able to learn how to talk about race and inequality so they can actively and successfully continue these dialogues beyond the walls of the classroom. The student resistance can look as follows:

Students exhibit kinds of resistance: White students may focus on students of color instead of on their own issues, and vice versa, or students may intellectualize by talking about the human condition in general, insist that the course is irrelevant to their needs, or simply keep silent. (Masko, & Bloem, 2017, p. 58).
The hope is that if students can critically and productively engage in dialogue to help create more equitable schools, they can then grow into adults who do the same. Typically, these discussions in schools commonly happen in English or social studies courses, which are great opportunities to have important dialogue, but if not facilitated by experienced and well-versed educators, they can be that much more damaging. The goal is to teach students how to think rather than what to think, and when political ideologies are espoused by teachers, students do not learn how to do that thinking for themselves or are shut out of the conversation if their beliefs do not align with the classroom teacher. Additionally, if teachers and schools ignore opportunities to confront systemic racism and instead couch experiences under the general human condition, this equips students with more colorblind ideology and discourse instead of learning to dismantle it. This is especially damaging to those students who have been victims of it. The authors also suggest that this critique of schools is also true of our students as future teachers: they may simultaneously be both instruments of domination and liberation for their students. Our goal is to help them to gain awareness, to center their teaching in social justice, and to challenge their epistemological naivete in order to move continually toward building and being a part of an institution of liberation. The challenge we face is resistance. Students often feel defensive and are somewhat resistant to the ideas presented in our courses’. (Masko. & Bloem, 2017, p. 61)

Again, teachers must be skilled in having open dialogue with students and helping all students to listen and to be heard, especially those who are disenfranchised and the recipients of these inequities. Schools also need to support these students as they are exposed to the deficit thinking of others and work through the ways in which they have been subjected to it. There are studies that show that students who experience the inequities resist the resistance, they can create other coping strategies that are not only dangerous but show the deep psychological impact students who have been oppressed by the current system experience. Rosenthal (2016) examined how
recent theory also suggests that some ‘risky’ behaviors (e.g. unprotected sex) may represent a form of resistance to oppression, inequality, and stigma for some individuals. Whether consequences of resistance are positive or negative, attending to the role of resistance can help us to better understand psychological dynamics and processes among oppressed, disempowered, and disadvantaged groups. (p. 481)

The consequences of student resistance are deep and dangerous for some students’ psychological and physical wellbeing, and now with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools must also be acutely aware of these new layers of disenfranchisement. Educators must be trained to create safe spaces for students and conversations and be ready to provide the necessary support to those who need it. Providing layered and targeted support is yet another key component to moving equity work forward and to serving the needs of all students.

White resistance can take many forms and for many different reasons. As Welton, Owens, and Zamani-Gallaher (2018) found:

Fear and racism go together in our individual, social, and institutional experience [...] They [white people] don’t want to think of themselves as personally guilty of the moral evil that is racism. They don’t want to be held accountable for an acknowledged social evil. They don’t want to be forced to consider that their own understanding of the institution of school may be fatally flawed. (p. 4)

The inability to engage in racial discourse blocks any form of meaningful or effective change. This discourse requires a common way in which racism is seen and defined, along with the more recent conversations and movement in regard to anti-racism. As also seen in the literature, “The continual retreat from the discomfort of authentic racial engagement in a culture infused with racial disparity limits the ability to form authentic connections across racial lines, and results in a perpetual cycle that works to hold racism in place” (Welton, Owens, & Zamani-Gallaher, 2018, p. 5). From a historical perspective, as much as things seem to have changed, they have remained the same. With Brown vs. Board of Education, there were federal mandates to desegregate schools. As Welton, Owens, and Zamani-Gallaher (2018) note:
Unfortunately, school districts were stagnant in their to desegregate, and now over 60 years later due to de facto segregation schools across the United States are more racially isolated than ever before--a prime example that educational institutions need to understand how the context and conditions of its past could be potential roadblocks to the changes necessary for present racial equity to be realized. (p. 9)

Whether it is outright racism and white supremacy, color blindness, or white fatigue, they are all forms of resistance that any form of progress faces and must resist as well. Being able to distinguish these forms of resistance and racism is needed to advance equity work as well. As Flynn (2015) suggests:

>The resistant do not yet see the reality of systemic and institutional racism and the default response wholly disallows critically engaging with a set of ideas that expose how racism functions and how White privilege is all but guaranteed through daily systemic and institutional practices. Moreover, the resistant do not see their own complicity in perpetuating systems of oppression. At least with white guilt, as debilitating as it can be, the guilty are in an active state of struggle. (p. 118)

Flynn argues that at least with what is termed as white guilt, white people at least are at a place of acknowledging racist structures and practices and are feeling badly about their participation in them. While they may not be at a place of actively doing something about those feelings and propelling them into action and change, they are acknowledging the damage our structures and institutions have done over time. Either way, or however one reflects on it, this work certainly contains many layers of resistance on individual and systemic levels.

In considering the deep-rooted reasons for resistance in the forms of white privilege and colorblind ideology, educators and policy makers must not only equip themselves with the understanding of what they are up against in implementing equity work but also how to combat the resistance. Oakes, Stuart Wells, Jones, and Datnow (1997) point out that it would be helpful for policymakers to gain a better understanding of local political resistance to reforms aimed at giving low-income and non-White students access to high-status knowledge and for them to consider how this resistance is related to cultural domination and inequality in our highly stratified society. Furthermore, policymakers
must realize that such resistance at the local level will be difficult to counteract in a highly decentralized system. (p. 137)

It is not just understanding that there is resistance to this work and some of the reasoning behind it, but also understanding the structures that have been created to maintain privileged structures and institutions and then working to dismantle them, which presents additional challenges. When people have a thorough understanding of the complexities with equity work, they are better able to do the work and move it forward. Welner (1999) states that “understanding opposition does not erase it, but when change agents can anticipate these reactions, they can better plan to confront and respond to the frustrations and signs of resistance that accompany change” (p. 211). One must know what they are fighting against and why, and they must also possess the savviness to create and implement plans that resist the resistance before it occurs.

For real, substantial anti-racist change to occur the institutional leaders must first be able to withstand the resistance and pushback that comes when members try to avoid engaging in discussions about race, let alone changes that push them to alter institutional policies and practices. (Welton, Owens, & Zamani-Gallaher, 2018, p. 11)

Considering all that school leaders are tasked to do, this work adds layers and responsibilities that many are unprepared or unsure of how to do. Some studies show how unprepared educational leaders are to do this work, starting in their preparation programs and carrying into the workforce where many times they may not have the staff members or community support to move work forward. A growing trend for many districts is to hire equity directors, which are usually individuals who serve at the district level and who are tasked with identifying and helping to dismantle equity barriers on a larger scale. This is definitely important work, but it should also involve providing more support to those who are trying to impact student learning and disrupt inequitable systems at the school level.
Leading Equity Work

As individual and group resistance greatly impacts equity work, another factor to consider is those who attempt to lead the equity work in schools, those who have to fight this resistance, and who those are unprepared and exhausted from the challenges faced in resisting the resistance. Theoharis (2007) defines “social justice leadership to mean that these principals make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership, practice, and vision” (p. 223). This requires that social justice leaders make every aspect of their work about equity and serving all students. And while that is why most got into the profession, some may have the deeply entrenched colorblind mindsets previously discussed. That is why Sampson (2019) reiterates that

educational equity is one of the most difficult areas for districts to achieve [...] this problem has not been ignored, but neither has it been addressed sensibly and meaningfully. With great fanfare, it has been misdiagnosed and mishandled. Although the journey toward educational equity can be challenging, those navigating the journey are often unprepared in their leadership and unclear about the destination. (p. 538)

If school leaders actively work through these mindsets and make it their primary duty to pursue equity work, they must be skilled in how to move the work forward and how to create a narrative that elicits buy-in and traction.

While advancing justice, these principals met resistance within their own schools and communities. They described that they felt this resistance coming directly from the demands of the principalship, the momentum of the status quo, obstructive staff attitudes and beliefs, and insular and privileged parental expectation. (Theoharis, 2007, p. 238)

In his study, Theoharis interviews a number of principals who are focusing on equity in their schools. He, too, is a principal working toward the same goal and has experienced the resistance and exhaustion in trying to achieve it. What many of his interviews with these
principals revealed is that the principals felt both unprepared and supported in doing this work.

They noted it was a constant battle, resulting in both emotional and physical duress:

The resistance these principals faced from their positions, their staff, the community, the school district, and beyond posed serious consequences for the leaders in this study. They described two consequences of facing this resistance: 1. a great personal toll and 2. a persistent sense of discouragement. (p. 242)

While these leaders believed deeply in the work, they also needed the stamina to move it forward. As noted previously, the resistance experienced in the schools, especially now with the pandemic, is coming at school leaders from a global to local scale. The resistance, experienced by these principals, was articulated and differentiated in the following ways:

In adding to the growing body of literature on leadership for social justice, the experiences these principals described can be understood as a three pronged framework of resistance: 1. the resistance principals enact against historic marginalization of particular students, 2. the resistance principals face as a result of their social justice agenda, and 3. the resistance principals develop to sustain their social justice agenda in the face of resistance (Theoharis, 2007, p. 248).

This multi-layered and systemic resistance has been compounded over time and is a lot for one individual, or group of individuals, to fight against. However, if school leaders wait for their staff to get on board with each movement toward more equitable structures, they may never progress at all, which is why sometimes the system needs to change and then allow the minds to follow. To further compound this, leaders can be completely blindsided by the resistance:

Pollack and Zirkel (2013) note that

in fact, educational leaders are frequently blindsided by the fierce opposition that often comes from privileged mid-and upper-income, predominately white, parents--opposition that sometimes contradict public expressions of concern about the need for schools to better serve “all” students and to reduce or eliminate the so called “achievement gap. (p. 291).
Again, it seems the only choice school leaders have is to keep pressing forward with this work in spite of the resistance, especially if they want to make schools work for all students. A new definition of educational leadership is suggested by some of the literature:

Similar to Ladson-Billings argument for redefining good teaching, leadership that is not focused on and successful at creating more just and equitable schools for marginalized students is indeed not good leadership. I caution us all to consider that decades of good leadership have created and sanctioned unjust and inequitable schools. (Pollack & Zirkel, 2013, p. 253)

This is why the field of education needs to redefine good leadership as social just work to help move this work forward and to help support the individuals doing it. There also needs to be comprehensive programs and support for leaders from the onset of their course work and then continued through their work in schools.

To extend the examination of the impact on school leaders, which can slow progress with equity work, Tuters (2017) found that

those who choose to engage in equity work often experience conflict with stakeholders such as colleagues, superiors, and parents. Engaging in equity work can also be associated with a lack of promotion and retention, isolation, and emotional distress related to engaging in processes such as retrospective meaning making to change and challenge one’s thinking. Even those who believe strongly in the value of equity work and are committed to creating positive change are often ill equipped to deal with the challenges of this work. (p. 50)

Facing the personal and professional losses that come with this work can be daunting for school leaders. What these leaders choose to do, or not do, could indicate a political perspective and to what extent they are invested in equity, which will definitely impact those they need to get involved in the work, such as students, teachers, and community members.

To work through the lack of preparation from educational leadership programming and the systems that work against equity, Mansfield, Rainbolt, and Fowler (2018) suggest that “unless school leaders reflect on how implicit biases influence their own practices, they are not
ready to deliberately engage others in conversations around racism and Whiteness, thus curtailing the potential power of well-meaning school reforms’ (p. 15). The first step is doing the work from within to lead the work in schools. While there is no end point to this work, there is a solid foundation one must have to genuinely and effectively move the work forward and continue learning on an individual and systemic basis. With that knowledge, leaders must create and articulate a vision for all stakeholders to understand and hopefully follow.

Principals make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalized conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership, practice, and vision. This definition centers on addressing and eliminating marginalization in schools [...] also how their own values and beliefs may impact their abilities to address those unjust practices. (Skousen & Domangue, 2020, pp. 103-104)

Through understanding the need for the personal, professional, and systemic work and change, leaders, in partnership with all stakeholders, can move forward in a direction that will result in improved conditions and experiences for all students.

School leaders also need to create strong partnerships with staff, students, and the community to aid in this work:

Despite the benefits of incorporating youth voice to education reform, school leaders rarely seek the views of students to inform policies and practices at the school or district levels. A paradigm shift, centering students as educational leaders rather than passive recipients of adult leadership, requires school leaders to intentionally disrupt the patterns of the past that have unquestionably continued for so long. (Lac & Baxley, 2019, p. 35)

Student voices, those who are experiencing firsthand the ways in which the schools and system work for and against them, should be empowered to actively participate in the process and support the efforts of the school. The programming for leadership preparation can also play a part by equipping school leaders with the skills to effectively collaborate with and work alongside these stakeholders. “Educational leadership programs, furthermore, do not prioritize
preparing school leaders to work alongside students, parents, and families, collectively, as social justice leaders” (Lac & Baxley, 2019, p. 35). With re-prioritization, training, and the ability to seek out student, parent, and community support, the work of these school leaders will not be as isolating or stagnant. As Lac and Baxley suggest:

School leaders and teachers must tap into the funds of knowledge from families, positioning students and parents as purveyors of knowledge not traditionally recognized in schools that disrupt deficit notions of low-income, racially marginalized families. A call for collective educational leadership requires all hands on deck, from the teaching staff to the students, families, and communities that surround the school with principals serving as bridges between various stakeholders. The quest for racial justice and educational equity should not rest on the shoulders of school leaders alone; however, administrators are uniquely positioned to facilitate opportunities to leverage the leadership of teachers, students, and families. (p. 38)

This call for collective educational leadership prioritizes equity work and the engagement of all stakeholders. To establish and build trusting partnerships, educational leaders must make it a priority to go into their communities to seek understanding and work with those who can help resist the resistance. The jobs of principals are incredibly demanding as they are pulled in multiple directions on a daily basis and are many times limited in time and resources. As Green (2017) reiterates: “Even though principals have demanding schedules, it is imperative for them, along with their teams, to spend time within the community to develop authentic relationships with students, their families, and community members” (p. 25). The sooner principals can establish these relationships, the sooner they will be able to implement change in their schools that benefits all students.

While knowing what one is working against is not easy, it helps to determine how to overcome whatever that resistance might be and to then understand what the appropriate steps are to reach the end goal. Welner (1999) explains that “understanding opposition does not erase it, but when change agents can anticipate these reactions, they can better plan to confront and
respond to the frustrations and signs of resistance that accompany change” (p. 211). Leaders need to get ahead of the message and drive the narrative rather than spending all of their time combating it. From the personal accounts of principals, they acknowledge the need to build their own resistance: “Along with the ability to enact resistance through enhancing reflective consciousness and developing a broader knowledge and skills base, future leaders require the skills to develop their own resistance as they face barriers to social justice” (Theoharis, 2007, p. 250). Learning to effectively, purposefully, and systematically resist the resistance is the one way in which school leaders can help to make a difference for all students and make sure that they do not make compromises that result in greater issues and inequities along the way. Resistance to equity work will always be present; however, it matters most and must be combatted when it halts or slows equity work to the detriment of students and staff. That being said, resistance does not always need to be viewed in a negative light. To move any work in schools forward, stakeholders must have an understanding of where everyone is coming from and to try to garner as much support as possible. Moving ahead too fast and leaving others behind in this work has the potential of creating frustration and additional resistance. While it is not realistic to wait until everyone is on board, it is helpful to make sure teams and schools are traveling together. When there is more buy-in – even if it slows the pace of the progress – the positive impact will be much greater when there are more people leading the charge and engaging in the work. In sum, when students, staff, and community members gain an understanding of this broader picture, they can join forces and help move the work forward for everyone.
Approaches to Measuring Equity Work

Understanding what equity work is and how it helps all students by providing resources to support the professional development and programming needed to move equity work forward as well as support leaders and schools who are trying to do the work helps make schools more equitable. What hinders this work is when the support and understanding are missing and when misinformation and political opposition drive or halt the process. Finding a way to clearly measure how equity work helps students and what it looks like when it benefits all students is imperative. That is why bridging all perspectives and using resistance to debunk misinformation and bring people together is what is needed for this work to have the greatest impact.

Measuring equity work focuses primarily on outputs, both perception and reality. The perception focuses on how individuals involved and impacted feel about the pace and way in which the work is or is not moving forward and how they as individuals are impacted by the work. Outputs can also be test scores, student data, graduation rates, and other metrics that look at the extent to which schools are supporting all students toward achieving high levels of learning and academic outcomes. There are some commonalities in the literature that focus on the ways in which schools and districts can measure, both quantitatively and qualitatively, equity work. Audits, course programming, finances, test scores, and interviews are a few of the tools schools can use to assess their progress toward achieving equity. Each one serves a different purpose; therefore, multiple tools must be used to fully and accurately gauge progress toward equity in a school or district.

To know where to go, you need to know where you are starting. Audits are a way to analyze to what extent they are addressing the complex work of equity in education. Audits
provide a starting point, revealing specific strengths and areas for further development. Because they provide a framework, once those needs areas are established, schools and districts have a pathway to achieve their goals. For example, the Regional Office of Education (ROE) in DuPage County has been working on a framework for districts to address equity that aligns with an audit process, which includes the following five equity-related strands: recruitment and hiring, curriculum and instruction, climate and culture, systemic equity, and family and community engagement. These areas align with much of the literature about equity work and are broad enough to encompass a number of substrands that detail the work needed in each area. Similar to the ROE example, the literature (e.g., Green, 2017) provides examples of equity audits recommended for schools and points to the need to include community stakeholders in each step of the audit process: “The community-based equity audit provides a bottom-up, community-based approach to address school-community inequities, and more importantly, offers educational leaders and those who prepare them practical strategies and a place to start for doing this work” (p. 30). This type of audit involves educational leaders working alongside community members to ensure all voices have a seat at the table working toward common goals to best meet the needs of all students. Honoring and prioritizing the voices of families in the community with students in the schools allows educational leaders to implement measures to impact students and to have a clear understanding of what those needs are directly from the individuals whose needs must be met. With schools being a reflection of their communities, stakeholders from both groups must lead together to understand the complexities of the equity work and then gather their resources to make progress toward achieving common goals. An audit allows for an initial evaluation of the strengths and areas for further development and then a way to continuously measure progress. Community-based audits provide collective and ongoing progress checks and
evaluations with the help from students, teachers, parents, leaders, and community members that make it more powerful and the impact systemic.

**Academics and Programming**

Standardized test scores are another way to measure progress toward achieving more equitable instruction and programming. State and district scores can provide information in regard to mastery of adopted standards and basic skills, and these data can be used for comparisons. While these scores generate comparable data and demographic information, advanced placement exams are unique in that the scores not only align with a level of achievement but are also associated with the level of programming in which the student participated. Since they are nationally normed tests, the data provide valuable information for schools, teachers, and for comparison of class to class and state to state. Specifically, the data show whether a school’s advanced placement program is aligned with and representative of student demographics. Unfortunately, in most schools, the data reveal the disproportionality and how some of the requirements and processes in schools can be exclusionary when it comes to having access to these courses:

Supposedly, such rules are necessary to maintain AP’s reputation as a merit-based accomplishment. In reality, though, they function to exclude many young people. According to Education Trust (2013): our examination of reach across different groups of students revealed wide differences in participation. Middle- and high-income students who attended schools with AP classes are three times as likely to enroll in an AP course as are low-income students. Asian students participate at more than twice the national average, while black and American Indian students participate at about half the rate of the national average. (Starr, 2017, p. 73)

The national data trends point to glaring disproportionality. In an effort to combat this disproportionality, the College Board recognizes schools who can maintain or improve their test
scores each year while diversifying the racial and socioeconomic makeup of their courses.

Schools put measures such as summer bridge courses in place to allow students who have never taken an AP class try one for the first time. Even though the College Board encourages this, they are a for-profit institution that has created greater inequities within the schools by allowing students who already have academic and socioeconomic advantages earn scores to test and then opt out of college-level courses, saving money and time for those individuals and families. High schools being charged with closing the gaps can be daunting work for school leaders and once again meet with resistance from teachers and community members:

> Opening access to AP for all students isn’t an easy undertaking nor is overcoming the inevitable resistance [...] Leading from a social justice lens requires that school and system leaders understand the rules that have been created to privilege some and oppress others. The seemingly objective entrance criteria for AP classes have served to rank and sort our public school students so that white and Asian students continue to excel while black and Hispanic students are kept out of such opportunities. Leaders must deliberately and intentionally change those conditions by rewriting the rules, examining the data, supporting students, teachers and leaders, and establishing accountability based on the idea that all students must have access to the highest levels a school offers. (Starr, 2017, p. 73)

Advanced placement programming is another way schools can sort or track students. Rules need to be re-written at all levels to begin to bridge these gaps and so one level of programming or schooling does not undermine or create additional barriers for the next. As schools analyze the data, they must look at the K-12 trajectory of how programming from a young age tracks and supports some students in reaching an advanced placement level class, while others encounter barriers that keep them from enrolling and taking accelerated courses. It is not just the work for one level of school to bridge these gaps; instead school leaders need to look at the full K-12 schooling experiences and work together to have the greatest impact. Testing data from state and
district for advanced placement are an effective way to measure progress equity within a school’s curriculum and programming.

Through examination of course programming in schools – specifically, how many levels of classes a school offers – one can measure the extent to which their programming has become more equitable. The more tracks of classes the school has, the more ways they are able to sort students. Data show how schools have a disproportionate number of minoritized and low socioeconomic students in lower-level courses, courses that typically have less skilled teachers and do not allow students to gain access to post-secondary institutions without the completion of remediation somewhere along the way. Oakes, Stuart Wells, Jones, and Datnow (1997) clearly articulate the issues with tracking:

Unlike the more blatantly racist parents of an earlier generation, who resisted school desegregation policies because they did not want their children in schools with ‘colored’ children, these influential parents are more subtle and savvy in their resistance to detracking efforts that lead to desegregation within schools. They couch their opposition to detracking mainly in terms of the low-track students’ ‘behavior’--lack of motivation to learn, lack of commitment to school or interest in higher education, tendency to act out, and so forth--without making the connection between these behaviors and the low-track students’ ‘penetration’ of an equal and hierarchical system in which they are at the bottom. (p. 139)

Systemic racism in schools is clearly obvious through the ways in which schools track their classes, as examined through the racial and economic composition of those courses. Schools have faced much opposition in breaking down the barriers and in trying to create access to higher-level courses and programming. The resistance may stem from students, teachers, administrators, and community members. When the resistance is happening from within the school as well as from the outside, it can be difficult to make gains. However, research overwhelmingly shows the issues with maintaining tracking and how years of data show all students are more successful academically when schools are detracked. Students who perform
well continue to excel, and others who may have been identified for a lower track rise to the higher standards and expectations, which results in all students being able to access the same resources, instruction, and opportunities within a school. Rubin (2003) found that providing a sense of the persistence of the deeply held cultural beliefs, ideologies, and arrangements of power that detracking seeks to confront, these studies suggest that educators trying to implement detracking are challenging ideologies that are at the core of our educational system. (p. 543)

These challenging ideologies revolve around privilege and people’s beliefs about who is deserving and has earned a particular advantage. Unfortunately, these are long-standing ideologies present not just within our school system but on a societal level as well. As schools acknowledge and understand the historical and entrenched nature of these systems, they are better able to dismantle those structures. Detracking is one way schools can address systemic inequities and move the work forward. Leaders must continue to process and understand that “the educational problems that created the need for detracking are rooted in systemic inequalities along race and class lines, which detracking reform alone cannot fully address” (Rubin, 2003, p. 567). With that knowledge, leaders can help others understand the issues with tracking and the disadvantages for students. That is why, while detracking cannot fully address all of the systemic inequalities, it is a step in the right direction toward a more equitable learning experience for all students. Tracking data is indicative of student access to college preparatory curriculum and the support and programming to which high school students have access.

**Discipline Data**

Discipline proportionality or disproportionality is another measure of the extent to which schools are making progress with equity work. Decades of data have shown that minoritized
students are disproportionately identified and compared to their White peers. This has resulted in what is termed as the school-to-prison pipeline. Mansfield, Rainbolt, and Fowler (2018) note that

this general impression that students of color behave less appropriately than students that are White is an example of cultural racism: Found in both individuals and institutions, cultural racism attributes values and normality to White people and Whiteness, and devalues, stereotypes, and labels people of color as ‘other,’ different, less than. Such cultural racism may impact student selection for a referral from teachers who view a minority student’s behavior as too far outside of the valued norm; teachers may not even be aware of their own racial biases in this regard. (p. 4)

As schools respond to cultural racism, they are implementing restorative justice practices and educating staff about how to better serve all students. This includes both how educators respond to students and how they guide students in working out issues with their peers. Restorative practices have been shown to be more respectful and fair to all students: “Past research has shown that African American youth are perceived by teachers to be less defiant and more responsive to authority when the students believe they have been heard and treated fairly, two cornerstones of restorative practices” (Mansfield, Rainbolt, & Fowler, 2018, p. 10). The implementation of restorative practices helps students feel more connected to the school, their teachers, and each other. When these practices are implemented thoroughly and effectively, they are also shown to increase student achievement. As Bottiani, Bradshaw, and Mendelson (2017) describe:

The literature suggests the likelihood that schools with highly differential patterns of suspension by race may be perceived by students as unfair and less inclusive environments, particularly by Black students, whereas schools with less clearly racialized patterns in discipline may be perceived as more equitable. In turn, the degree to which the school environment is perceived as fair and inclusive, or equitable, has been associated with students’ sense belonging to the school. (p. 533)
The degree to which restorative practices are effectively implemented, reflects the extent to which schools are becoming more equitable in their discipline practices. To accurately gauge this, discipline data disaggregated by race and gender should be reviewed over time – not just who is being disciplined but also what consequences are received as a result of those actions. As Zakszeski, Rutherford, Heidelberg, and Thomas. (2021) suggest:

Schools may be over representing student demographic groups in office discipline referrals that extend beyond race to include students who are male, in schools’ upper grades, and not participating in special education. [some] practices may be inadequate in reducing discipline disproportionality without equity-focused (culturally responsive) implementation. (p.129)

By examining data trends, schools can better identify who their discipline practices impact most and to what extent they are effective in curbing behaviors. They can also identify more of the root causes to behavioral issues to decrease discipline issues and keep students connected to the classroom and learning.

Interviewing affected students about restorative justice practices on an ongoing basis can also help to inform how well these practices are being implemented. Leaders and teachers need to be familiar with these data and continue to track them to explore the school culture and create an environment in which students feel safe, welcomed, and connected. They also need to be familiar with and educated about the practices to diminish the discipline disproportionality.

LaForett and De Marco (2020) propose that to address discipline disproportionality, teachers need to be trained in SEL, classroom management, cultural competency, and racial equity approaches. [...] Education may be better equipped to teach students of color and break down entrenched patterns of institutionalized racism in the U.S. education system. It is only through a comprehensive, systemic approach to educational disparity that we can move the field forward and meaningfully address educational disparities affecting students of color. (p. 302).
This multifaceted and comprehensive approach has the potential to create more equitable schools. The combination of these competencies can allow schools to begin addressing the systemic issues that impact our students, especially our BIPOC students. Staff can learn more about themselves and each other to more positively impact students. There are components of these practices that also help all members of a school community, both students and staff, to work out conflicts with each other and model best practice. The power of these practices if implemented correctly and with fidelity will have a lasting impact. That is why discipline data, both qualitative and quantitative, can illustrate the extent to which schools are achieving equity from a local to national level.

**School Resources**

Another way for schools to measure progress with equity work is by examining school resources. As one walks into a school building, it is easy to see how resources have been allocated from cleanliness and technology to updated furniture and building structures. Walking a building is an informal and at-a-glance way to get a feel for the resources to which students have access. Even just looking at the athletic facilities helps to gauge where money has been prioritized. This is why per pupil expenditures are another way to determine how students are being served and supported from a local to a national level: Knight (2017) examines how “prior to the recession, high-poverty districts received $289 per student less state and local funding, on average, compared to otherwise similar low-poverty districts. By 2012-2013, the funding gap between high- and otherwise similar low-poverty districts increased to $1,004 per student” (p. 170). High-poverty districts require more funding to level the playing field and provide equal
access to opportunities. While sometimes the differences seem minimal, the impact of school financing inequities can be felt over a student’s lifetime:

A student in a high-poverty district who experiences a decline in spending around 10% would see a meaningful impact on their life outcomes. If exposed to this decline in funding at the time of entering school, and this lower funding level was in place for all 12 years of schooling, the results suggest that a student would experience 15% decline in their likelihood of graduating high school, an increase in their likelihood of living in poverty of about 11%, and a decrease in their adult earnings of about 9% or $3,500 per year. (Knight, 2017, p. 173)

The cycle of inequities, starting in the early grades, is clear when examining how schools are financed and how this impacts student learning and opportunities over the course of a K-12 education. The inequitable cycles with education, living in poverty, and adult wages continue, in part, due to the lack of opportunities and funding for education and in providing the support for all students to succeed. In times where the state or country is struggling economically, like in a recession, the impact of financial disparities are even greater:

Changes in achievement gaps over time likely increased for a multitude of reasons, many of which could be related to changes in socioeconomic conditions associated with the Great Recession. For example, lower-income families experienced greater increases in unemployment compared to higher-income families. Similarly, states may have reduced the availability of social services available in high-poverty neighborhoods, whereas families in lower-poverty neighborhoods rely less on these services. (Knight, 2017, p. 184)

It is not just the amount it takes to educate a student and provide basic resources but also the financial support needed for specialized programming such as for English learners or special education students. As they should be, schools are mandated by the state and federal government to provide these services. In cases in which the school cannot provide the required support, they may need to arrange for transportation and pay for the out-of-building services. The financial burdens to these schools and districts can range greatly, and if a school is already struggling, then the ability to provide all students with needed support becomes more
challenging. These are additional expenses that must be prioritized and supported. For instance, as Knight (2017) shared:

When states reduce education funding, the burden of these cuts often falls most heavily on the districts that serve greater proportions of students in poverty and emergent bilingual students. Meanwhile, these higher-need districts face additional costs to provide compensatory educational programs. (p. 170)

The impact of these funding cuts is greater in struggling communities. Wealthier communities may issue bonds or other financial measures to help supplement during an economic downturn, and by doing so, the community may not even notice the difference to their daily lives depending on their level of wealth. However, when struggling communities increase their taxes, they feel the financial impact more and the amount raised still may not be able to meet the schools’ funding needs. The financial burden is put more heavily on those who may already be struggling financially, thus, perpetuating and widening the gap. This is why school finance is another measure for districts and states to identify inequities and see to what extent those inequitable gaps are narrowing or becoming greater.

Feedback from All Stakeholders

An additional method to measure the effectiveness of a school’s equity work is to garner feedback from all stakeholder to identify and share the narratives or experiences that show progress or emphasize gaps and/or areas for improvement. Many studies explain how master narratives are created – those that dominate whatever program or initiative is being implemented – and how they can work for but typically work against equity work in schools. These stories also have the power to allow others to see the need for this work. Typically, the privileged narrative becomes the master narrative, which can often perpetuates resistance to an equity
effort. This is one reason counter-narratives must be shared, so the voices of those experiencing inequities can be heard, understood, and used to propel stakeholders into action. Pollack and Zirkel (2013) demonstrate in their study how counter stories can build community and solidarity among socially marginalized groups individuals; more effectively challenge majoritarian narratives and orthodoxies by exposing systems and instances of inequity and white privilege; nurture community cultural wealth, memory, and resistance; and facilitate meaningful transformative change toward greater educational equity. (p. 304)

Engaging communities in feedback sessions and finding ways to generate feedback reveal these counter stories and empower students to share their experiences, give feedback, and be a part of real and systemic change. In doing this work, it is imperative for all stakeholders to contribute to the greater narrative so everyone thoroughly understands the strengths and deficits of the school and how well the school is serving its students. In essence, the counter narrative needs to become the master narrative to drive change in schools:

A well-articulated equity framework explicates the specific nature of the opportunity gap to be closed, how it is potentially manifested over a student’s academic career, and how its closure might optimally be pursued. A central theme across both critical social work and education literature suggests that the voices of students of color, their families, and their communities must be a part of these processes. (Stone, 2017, p. 1240)

Teachers and leaders must use their leverage to give their students and communities that same leverage and decision-making power for true and lasting change. Educators need to work hard on personal and professional levels to transform rather than reinforce systemic inequities. Kelly (2020) demonstrates how “teachers committed to bringing about educational equity must be willing to engage in acts of ‘fugitivity’, working to transform rather than reinforce the oppressive nature of schooling by leveraging their social and institutional positionality” (p. 462). The power of the counter narrative can aid in moving all facets of the school organization forward and support teachers who are willing and able to dismantle the oppressive structures and practices
within schools. As the literature shows, giving more voice to inequities allows schools to personalize, process, and confront inequities to move forward for the betterment of everyone in the school system. Furthermore, they can reveal power structures that maintain inequities and silence students and those who dismantle inequities and empower students:

The stories that emerge from this study, especially those pertaining to the 2016 presidential election, reveal the power that school leadership has in influencing school culture and curriculum. If enacted as a force to empower rather than silence students of color, this influence can be used to transform schools into spaces of equity in which students can heal from racial trauma, develop agency, and engage critical approaches in their collective struggle for liberation. (Squinn, 2021, p. 462).

There is a lot of power in student stories, and schools need to leverage and empower those voices to have the greatest impact. Thus, feedback from stakeholders and counter narratives are another way for schools and districts to measure the effectiveness of their equity efforts. While this method does not provide specific data points, what it does provide is a pulse on school building that has the power to engage all voices and help others join the equity efforts.

Alignment with the Definition of Equity

While there are both quantitative and qualitative means to measure to what extent equity work in a school is successful or falls short, not all of these approaches align with a comprehensive definition of equity. Equity work requires providing all students access and support to achieve equal opportunities, and the means to that end may look different depending on the students’ needs. Schools must look at everything they do through an equity lens: curriculum, assessment, culture and climate, hiring and recruitment, finance, etc. While the literature poses ways to measure and evaluate the effectiveness of some areas, such as achievement data like advanced placement programs, tracking, finance, and discipline, they are
not comprehensive enough to measure the full progress and impact of equity work. There are many areas in which literature on the approaches to measure the extent to which equity work is happening falls short. This is seen in Zhou, Cao, and Jacob’s (2020) case study of computer science (CS) classes:

The teachers in our study consider students’ equal access and participation in CS education programs as the most prevalent issues regarding students’ roles in equity. These observations point to the weak end of the social justice framework, namely, teachers mainly frame student participation in computer science as the redistributive model of access. (p. 7)

A common misconception when looking through a curriculum and instruction lens is that if students have access to the device, internet, resources, etc., then equity has been achieved. This is only one foundational step of many. Districts examining their one-to-one technology initiatives and being able to share that all students have been given a device and internet access is only one piece to the puzzle. What that does not account for is students’ background information and understanding of how those devices are to be used and for what purpose, which are essential for students to use the devices as a learning tool. As Zhou et al. note:

Throughout these themes, equity was portrayed as equality, that is, as equal participation and equal access to resources. This points to an understanding of equity that is limited to how resources and opportunities are distributed among students. There is little discussion of how student participation is influenced by systemic factors that may perpetuate inequitable participation and may represent the root causes of unequal access. (p. 13)

This study delved into computer science classes because they are a gateway course to a number of careers and fields in which a programming background and related skills are instrumental. This study showed the demographic breakdown of these courses and then explored how many computer science teachers have limited understanding of equity in that they believe if all students are provided a device, then they are on a level playing field. Equity work shows that this could not be farther from the truth. Schools need to understand the complexity of meeting students’
needs and that equity work addresses the many layers of inequities occurring both inside and outside of the schools. Furthermore, educators need an understanding of intersectionality that allows them to understand more about the multiple forms of oppression students may experience and how these challenges are unique and complex with no simple solutions. One measure or step toward equity cannot gauge the impact for all students. Multiple measures need to be used to provide a complete understanding of the initiative or equity approach, and this next step is lacking in the literature. Thus, educators need to do a lot of work to get to this level of understanding:

Black communities continually endure an onslaught of dehumanizing narratives that unfairly shape how school officials perceive their students. Furthermore, anti-black racism and sentiments permeate the consciousness of teachers, specifically white teachers and non-Black teachers of color, in our country without intentional recognition or redress. Rarely do educators interrogate the subtleties of race and institutionalized racism in how it shapes and informs policies and practices nested within a school, such as racialized tracking or implicit racial bias. (Lac & Baxley, 2019, p. 36)

This work is complicated and organizations need to support these policy and practice efforts from an individual to a system level through examining biases and practices that perpetuate inequities.

While all of these approaches align with the definition of equity in schools, they only address some facets of it. To comprehensively measure equity, there must be multiple measures for each area: recruitment and hiring, resources, culture and climate, curriculum and instruction, family and community engagement, etc. Not all of these areas have been directly mentioned in the literature. If schools use an audit process to measure their work, they will need to determine multiple ways to gauge the progress of each area, which is why equity work is both challenging and, at times, overwhelming, especially since the work is most often met with resistance.
Context of Studies

The studies examined through this research vary in context: a large diverse school in Portland with a range of socioeconomic statuses and races; a large school district in Salt Lake City with increasing EL population; a diverse Midwestern elementary school; a large suburban high school increasing in diversity; and some specific classroom settings such as computer science courses and those that offer maker spaces. While each of these is unique and presents its own challenges, what is lacking is consistency in the context of these studies, specifically the need to provide more examples of suburban schools that are predominantly white and making progress with equity work. The studies have many gaps, and therefore, it is difficult to find clear pathways for progress that are substantiated through multiple examples. There are national and ongoing studies about detracking and restorative justice, and while helpful, those only address specific areas of course programming and discipline. In addition, there is a lot of theory about bridging gaps but not as many specific examples to use as models or to emulate. As noted by Martin, Dixon, and Betser. (2018),

The difficulty of bridging such theoretical perspectives with practice is well known, and equity concerns in making are no exception to this theory-practice gap. Equity frameworks must be made locally meaningful so that they exist at the level of implementation. (p. 36)

If these frameworks and theories could be made more locally meaningful through examples of places in which progress in equity work has been made for schools to model, then schools and districts will have more of a starting point for this work and an additional layer of support. Unfortunately, consistent context is lacking in this literature, which makes it difficult to determine if all of the approaches and measures mentioned would be effective in a variety of school contexts.
Summary and Advancing Equity Work

To advance equity and social justice, the first step is to ensure that all members of schools, districts, and communities have a clear understanding of what equity and social justice mean in relation to the school context. They need to then understand that the role of teachers and administrators is, in part, to be social justice leaders and to carry out equity work with integrity and fidelity.

The next step is to create community-based task forces or committees to center and streamline the equity work. Since the work is complex and multifaceted, committees need to commit to each area of the work plan. After establishing this group, the committee should undergo an audit to analyze what the strengths and areas of improvement are for each school, as they are unique to each building even within the same district. Community groups have the ability to implement multiple layers of support. As Ward, Bagley, Lumby, Woods, Hamilton, and Roberts (2015) purport:

The interventions that are developed by the Equity and Action Group are geared towards reducing the negative effects of students’ specific material and cultural disadvantages. They include the development of support groups for refugees and immigrants; extra language and mathematics support; music and art therapy; family services, and acknowledgement of Indigenous heritage and issues through the National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee week. (p. 339)

These are just some of the ways in which these task forces and groups can implement impactful and lasting support.

Another step is for teachers, leaders, and support staff to undergo intensive training on implicit bias and culturally responsive teaching practices. The training should be ongoing and systemic with the understanding that there is no endpoint. As Welton, Owens, Zamani-Gallaher (2018) note, there are
specific skills educators should possess to implement system level anti-racist change: 1. develop an anti-racist environment for all constituencies 2. cultivate a school-wide anti-racism curriculum 3. hire diverse faculty 4. encourage the participation of all perspectives and confront controversy 5. bolster relationships with organizations that have an equity focus. (p. 6)

Schools should work to improve in all of these areas to have a lasting and systemic impact on their staff, students, and within their building. Diversity is needed in the hiring of faculty and staff, and districts must evaluate their recruitment and hiring practices. As detailed in the study by Kelly (2020):

The crucial development of students of color, and in particular girls of color, is bolstered by having faculty and administrators who reflect the cultural identities of their students; embedding institutionally marginalized narratives and histories in school curriculum; creating spaces within school for these students to learn about and engage with the histories of their communities; and connecting the school community to ‘individuals and organizations that help to strengthen students’ cultural pride. (p. 462).

Students need to see themselves in their teachers and in the curriculum. It is a way for them to connect with the school, their communities, and the world around them more and to learn more about themselves. An equitable school environment provides the ideas of windows and mirrors in which students can see themselves and learn more about others. This experience should not be reserved for White and privileged students. Additionally, schools need to find ways to engage the community and gain parent buy-in as well. If not, there will continue to be outside resistance that halts or impedes the progress schools are trying to make. Oakes, Stuart Wells, Jones, and Datnow (1997) point to how parents of high-achieving students and college educators and administrators need to become part of the solution to the under education of students in the lowest-level classes and lowest-status schools. Until these parents reconceptualize the issue, not as a zero-sum game in which one student’s gain is another student’s loss, but as an issue of helping more students achieve to their highest potential, there will be little movement to dismantle the current hierarchical, competitive structure in which only a handful of students are held to high standards. Until the higher educational system can ensure parents that this less hierarchical system is, in fact, the reality, world-class standards will
remain beyond the reach of all but the ‘chosen few’ who were placed at birth on the top tier of our stratified social structures. (p. 142)

If equity work is continually looked at as a zero-sum game, then it will be difficult to make progress when an important group of stakeholders, parents, does not understand and needs to improve the opportunities they desire for their own children for all students. As noted throughout the literature, parents are not alone with these mindsets.

Instilling an equity mindset in teachers and leaders is imperative for this work to move forward. It helps to build staff capacity for impacting students at all levels in a school setting.

As Nadelson, Albritton, Couture, Green, Loyless, and Shaw (2020) suggest:

At the strong end of the education equity mindset spectrum a teacher would be culturally responsive, engage in student-centered learning, take responsibility for student success, engage in informal leadership, perceive all students can succeed, know and understand student populations, and work to provide access to all. Thus, at the weak end, the mindset would be characterized by privilege, preference, and segregation, while the strong end of the spectrum would be characterized by inclusion, support for all, and advocacy for equity, (p. 27)

This is the professional learning for teachers that should be at the forefront of their work.

Culturally responsive teaching and learning practices help students feel connected and included in the classroom, and when they feel this way, they are more open to learn and grow. Teachers who are able to skillfully implement the practices can lead others to do so and extend the reach to be successful in schools to all students. Conversely, when those teaching skills and mindsets are lacking, knowingly or unknowingly, students experience the adverse effects of that as well. As Nadelson et al. describe:

The compartmentalization of perceptions of teaching as a profession and of the professional activities of teachers suggests what teachers want to do (or perceive teachers are supposed to do) and what they have to do may not be aligned. The misalignment is likely to lead to differences in perceptions and practices associated with an educational equity mindset. To bring alignment [...] teachers may require a culture shift in which
education equity is a priority and supported as a mindset among teachers to foster learning and success for all students. (p.37)

If principals are better able to cultivate this mindset, then they can directly impact the teachers who impact students on a daily basis. Whether they understand this or not, principals set the tone of their buildings. Embracing and growing this equity mindset is critical for moving equity work forward. As Shields and Hesbol (2020) contend:

What separates successful leaders from unsuccessful ones is their mental models or meaning structures, not their knowledge, information, training, or experience per se” [...] “Transformative leadership explicitly addresses the importance of mind-sets and knowledge frameworks and emphasizes the need to change those that perpetuate inquiry and to reconstruct them in more equitable ways [...] The way leadership is perceived and shaped--will to a large extent determine the success of the transformation it instigates among its students and members of staff. (pp. 6-8)

Transformative leadership requires an equity mindset. Leaders can have the knowledge and skills, but if the mindset does not carry forward, the message and work will be lost. It is this mindset that helps others understand why this work is important and motivates them to join the cause. This mindset is what leads the transformation to equity for all.

As mindset is critical for school leaders, they must also be supported in doing the work, and their schools must be supported as well. Another way to ensure this work moves forward is for schools to have the necessary resources and funding to support the changes in programming, professional development, and student support. School boards play an essential role with this as they have the power to approve funding and allocate the needed resources. In a study of a school board in Utah, Sampson (2019) found that

board members who are committed to supporting structural changes that advance equity, reconciling tensions, shifting from deficit-to asset-based assumptions, and engaging in culturally responsive practices can help build a more equitable system for ELs and other minoritized students [...] the importance of boards listening to stakeholders who are willing and able to engage in equity-oriented efforts, and more importantly, challenging those board members who fail to support those efforts. (p. 541)
Being able to listen, contribute, and confront varied perspectives with open and honest dialogue can help create understanding and bridge gaps. This is a critical role, and the importance of this level of support and buy-in must not be overlooked.

With all of the stakeholder support needed to advance this work in a systemic and meaningful way and with all of the resistance that surfaces as a result of these efforts, it is important to refer back to some of the literature that offers hope to individuals trying to move this type of work forward at a local level. As illustrated by Vue, Haslerig, and Allen (2017):

> While elite narratives are often privileged when forming policy, people of color and others most affected by policy are largely ignored. Yet, it is ordinary people who shift ideological and political winds and expand definitions of justice, which holds promise for those excluded. (p. 874)

The literature highlighted a couple of specific programming efforts led by individuals committed to equity work that merged their efforts with support of community partnerships. The first example is from The Preuss School on the University of California – San Diego’s campus. This school prepares first-generation college students from low-income families to go to a four-year college. Students start the program in 6th grade and remain in it through 12th grade; all students stay in the same academic track and receive differentiated support along the way. The graduation rate and four-year college acceptance rate is almost 100% (Squinn, 2021). The second example focuses on a smaller college called Martin University in Indiana. This school partnered with community businesses to help adults without college degrees attain higher levels of education to be more competitive in their field (Alvarez & Mehan, 2020). The students were trained in the specific skills and credentials needed to excel at higher levels within their field and to earn a college degree that would allow for both salary advancement and future workplace leadership opportunities. The program has been successful.
Considering all of the literature and varying perspectives of this work, equity work makes schools work for everyone. It focuses on providing differentiated access and opportunities to help students – particularly students of color, are marginalized, disenfranchised or discriminated against for any reason – to reach higher levels of learning and to be fully supported in accessing and engaging in the same experiences that those our society has privileged have received forever. Because our society and schools are deeply entrenched in systemic racism and are protected by those with privilege who may not want to disrupt a system that works well for them, equity work is difficult and frustrating. It is also the most important work educators should be engaged in. While this work may seem overwhelming, one person can make a difference, but that one person is stronger and more able to do work with allies by their side. Schools are representative of the communities they serve, and individuals have the power to change hearts and minds and to educate students, staff, and community about what it means for schools to serve all students, especially when they are equipped with the mindset, resources, and support to do the work and resist the resistance to it.
Research Methods

The following questions have been the focus of the research for both the literature review and for the empirical study: How is equity in schools defined and what does it look like? How do beliefs inform equity initiatives? How do principals deal with resistance? How do beliefs about equity inform resistance to the resistance? What actions are principals taking in terms of equity initiatives and how do they talk about the impacts? Throughout this entire study, the goal has been to delve into why this work is difficult and how schools can move it forward. Because of this, talking with school leaders – specifically, high school principals – was the goal for my empirical study. I wanted to hear firsthand how these leaders engage, or do not engage, in this work and what can be gleaned from these experiences to help move it forward. As an aspiring high school principal, and as a student and current administrator in a suburban school, I wanted to narrow the focus of these interviews to those who met the suburban high school principal criteria. As there are countless schools that fit that criteria, to narrow my focus further, I collaborated with my principal, Matt Biscan, to identify schools with a wide range of demographics and resources and with principals with varying backgrounds and experiences. My hope was to also find those in leadership positions with diverse backgrounds. White males disproportionately hold these positions, so my principal helped to identify women and leaders of color.
Over the course of three weeks from mid-September to late October, I conducted interviews with 13 high school principals. All of the interviews were in person with the exception of one that was on the phone and one that was via Google Meet. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. With the in-person interviews, 9 of the 11 took place at the principal’s building, and the remaining two took place at my high school. The interviews were a semi-structured format in that all received the same set of questions, yet some had follow-up questions and offered more anecdotal information either before or after the interview and were overall more conversational.

All of the principals work in high schools in the suburbs of Chicago, primarily the western suburbs. They are comprehensive high schools offering a wide array of academic and co-curricular programming. Most of the schools are predominantly White and serve students from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. All of the buildings are impressive and expansive and have facilities that serve a multitude of courses and programs; however, about half of the schools had more modern and up-to-date facilities. Each school boldly and consistently displayed its school’s mascot and colors. The variance was more in the personal touches some buildings added throughout the years, ranging from student art work and pictures to other accolades and messaging. Most of the principals’ offices were formally decorated and boasted about school recognition, both academic and athletic. Only three of the school offices appeared to be inclusive, with the range of pictures, colors, and experiences covering the walls and enhancing the decor. Table 1 details the pseudonyms, gender, race, experience, and demographics of each principal and their school.
### Table 1
High School Principals: Background and School Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>School Demographics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal P</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>60% White, 19% Asian, 11% Hispanic, 5% Black, 5% 2 or More Races, ED 15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>School P</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal M</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>16 years</td>
<td>61% White, 17% Hispanic, 14% Asian, 4% Black, 4% 2 or More Races, ED 23%</td>
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<tr>
<td>School M</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal J</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>14 years</td>
<td>38% White, 28% Hispanic, 24% Asian, 8% Black, 3% 2 or More Races, .5% American Indian/Alaska Native, ED 33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School J</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal A</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>44% White, 31% Hispanic, 13% Asian, 9% Black, 3% 2 or More Races, .4% American Indian/Alaska Native, ED 42%</td>
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<tr>
<td>School A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Principal B</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>39% White, 32% Hispanic, 11% Asian, 10% Black, 8% 2 or More Races, ED 17%</td>
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<tr>
<td>School B</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal S</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>16 years</td>
<td>56% White, 20% Asian, 17% Hispanic, 13% Black, 5% 2 or more Races, ED 21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School S</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table continued on next page
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>ED</th>
<th>Race Composition</th>
<th>2 or More Races</th>
<th>Other Race</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander</th>
<th>American Indian/Alaska Native</th>
<th>Economically Disadvantaged</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal E</td>
<td>School E</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>41% White</td>
<td>28% Asian</td>
<td>14% Hispanic</td>
<td>13% Black</td>
<td>4% 2 or More Races</td>
<td>.3% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>ED 20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Principal R</td>
<td>School R</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>43% White</td>
<td>34% Asian</td>
<td>14% Hispanic</td>
<td>5% Black</td>
<td>4% 2 or More Races</td>
<td>ED 30%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal S</td>
<td>School S</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>17 years</td>
<td>57% White</td>
<td>21% Hispanic</td>
<td>12% Black</td>
<td>7% Asian</td>
<td>3% 2 or More Races</td>
<td>ED 28%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Principal L</td>
<td>School L</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>56% White</td>
<td>18% Black</td>
<td>14% Hispanic</td>
<td>9% Asian</td>
<td>2% 2 or More Races</td>
<td>.2% American Indian/Alaska Native</td>
<td>ED 27%</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal T</td>
<td>School T</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>86% White</td>
<td>8% Hispanic</td>
<td>5% Asian</td>
<td>1% Black</td>
<td>.6% 2 or More Races</td>
<td>ED 5%</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal J</td>
<td>School J</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>80% White</td>
<td>11% Hispanic</td>
<td>3% Black</td>
<td>3% 2 or More Races</td>
<td>3% Asian</td>
<td>ED 17%</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal K</td>
<td>School K</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>16 years</td>
<td>48% White</td>
<td>31% Hispanic</td>
<td>9% Black</td>
<td>9% Asian</td>
<td>2.6% 2 or More Races</td>
<td>.5% American Indian/Alaska Native</td>
<td>ED 44%</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ED = % Economically Disadvantaged
For both in-person and virtual interviews, Google Meet with a transcription extension was used to audio record and transcribe the interviews. A video recording was included for the one virtual interview. As I asked questions of each principal, I also took multiple pages of notes. After each interview, I compared my notes to the transcriptions and started to identify common themes within each interview by printing the transcripts and coding themes in the margins of these pages. To organize these notes and make connections from one interview to the next, I created a chart on a Google Sheet that aligned the themes to the principals’ comments using direction quotations from the transcriptions. After all of the interviews were conducted, I reviewed the notes and transcriptions once again and cross checked all of the quotations added to the chart. This graphic organizer allowed me to pair responses to the themes listed in the subheadings below. It allowed me to identify and analyze common experiences and those that were outliers. Furthermore, it helped me process the data and support the conclusions and ideas with direct examples from the interviews. This was a time-consuming process; however, it allowed me to capture a full and accurate account of all of the interviews over the three-week period.

Limitations to this Study

The 13 principals interviewed in this study had a wealth of knowledge and experience that was both fascinating and inspirational. To learn more from them, it would have been beneficial, if more time allowed, to ask additional questions that would have prompted them to share more specifics about their work, both the successes and areas for improvement. It is obvious that all of them are working hard and many of them were struggling with the demands of the position in the current political and pandemic state. While they had a lot to share, I also
know that it is only one version of a story. Some admitted they would have taken a different
path with some of this work if they had more time or could do it over again. They also seemed
proud about but guarded in what they shared. Their work and efforts are worth taking pride in
and their experiences with angry stakeholders and community members made them guarded as a
result. While they knew that their confidentiality would be protected in this interview process, it
seemed difficult to share freely and openly about all facets of their work. This is understandable
because for all of them it seemed like more than just a job; they found meaning and value in their
work, even when it was frustrating, disheartening, and exhausting. I also gathered that while
they did not have enough time in their day to process their work, some of the interview questions
allowed them to consider what had gone well and what areas needed for further development
and/or improvement. It would be interesting to interview all of them again a year from now as
schools settle into their new post-pandemic normal.

Another limitation, since all of them were working in suburban high schools,
interviewing principals from more rural and urban areas would have expanded understanding of
this work. Also, a more comprehensive view of this work could have been gained by
interviewing principals of both elementary and middle schools. Another layer that would have
provided more insight to this work would be to interview staff and students to get a better idea of
to how their messages and leadership was received and what they viewed as the challenges to the
work. The pandemic also added a lot to the job of these school leaders and forced a number of
them to slow or restart their equity work. Being able to interview these leaders post-pandemic
about their equity work progress would have provided more insight into how one can lead this
work in their buildings without the added stress of a pandemic. Furthermore, the principal is
only one person. As they have an important role and drive a school’s vision, there are so many more stakeholders that influence, support, and impact this work.

**Serving All Students**

From the onset of each interview, all 13 principals expressed that their role was to serve all students and that they were striving to truly reach all students based on race, gender, socioeconomic status, etc. This role was directly stated by each, and it was obvious it was the center of their work and foundational to implementing any equity initiative. But what does it really mean to serve all students? It sounds like a common sense statement or idea; however, what goes into truly creating a school system that equitably serves all students is more complicated than it seems. As each principal articulated this vision, some of the nuances or challenges in doing so began to surface. The statement below, by Principal A, encompasses the general theme many of the others expressed.

> Every student every day. Giving every student what they need to reach their academic potential. In the end, to me, that’s equity. Our responsibility is to make sure that every student, regardless of their background, has access to everything that we have to offer. And that we are providing them what they need in order to access that and be successful [...] our charge to do that every single day, not easy, but that’s the charge.

The challenge and emphasis to do so was heard in the principal’s serious and reflective tone as he stated what equity work needs to look like in his building. The conviction that it must be every study, every day, amplified the effort needed to do this work. Principal A grew up in an area that was stretched for resources. It was due to the influence of his coaches at a young age that he connected to school and found himself excelling. He did not plan to be a teacher or coach later in life, and he stated that the career found him. Childhood experiences in Chicago helped him understand equity from a young age and how disparate the educational situations are for
some compared to others. Prior to his current position, he had worked in high-needs schools and those that are more privileged. His early schooling and work experiences greatly impacted his career trajectory and influenced how he leads. High School A is the most diverse school in his four high school district, and he is working daily to provide his students with the same opportunities and advantages as the others from wealthier and less diverse communities.

Principal S’s school is diverse and the community recently passed a multi-million dollar referendum to remodel most of the building and provide a state-of-the-art auditorium. Similar to Principal A, he found that it was his connection with coaches from a young age that brought him to pursue a career in education. In his early married years, Principal S was diagnosed with cancer. That traumatic period in his life was referenced a few times in the interview and contributed to his current view of education and what all students need to be successful. He spoke about the need for truly understanding what others are going through. Taking a slightly different perspective, he chose to focus on empathy as the path to serve all students and connect them with each other:

The goal is to keep evolving and honoring whoever and whatever their experiences are when they come in. [...] If we can do that, I’ve said, from the first day I started teaching if everyone could truly have empathy, true empathy. It would be easy because that was the one trait and characteristic if everyone could have, fixes most issues. So, trying to teach and instill empathy into kids, I think advances all equity work.

This is a message he shares with students and staff and that centers much of his work. Principal S will be retiring at the end of this year and was both passionate and reflective about the years he served as an educator and leader and how the idea of empathy has been one of his greatest takeaways from what he has experienced both personally and professionally.

With a similar passion and energy, Principal K shared what equity means to him and what it means to truly serve all students:
Every kid needs an individualized education plan. It just means that every kid feels like they belong here, and they have a spot, they have a place, but to do that, the adults have a community that supports that. When it comes to equity because I am glad that we’ve expanded the conversations beyond just race, which is incredibly important. But so is socioeconomic status and so is adverse childhood experiences. So is gender. So is language. So you know, I tell folks all the time, once you have more than you in the room, it’s a diverse setting. Because no two people are alike.

As he shared this response, there was an energy to his words and an urgency to his message. High School K has been leading with their equity work over the past decade, and Principal K has served in this role for over 10 years. Because he has built such a strong culture and climate in his building and as a result of his strong reputation, he is able to speak more freely and directly to staff, students, and community in regard to his charge with this work.

Principal R of High School R, starting her leadership role right before the pandemic, had this to say about what equity means to her and for education:

So, for me, it’s obviously providing kids with what is needed based on their own needs. I had a college professor who defined it as unequal treatment to unequals, so people are already starting off in an unequal situation. So we have to provide unequal resources [...]what you need to be successful and I just think the systemic inequities that exist are because school was made for a very limited type of person. And the majority of us now don’t fit that mold. So, you know, how do we remove the cookie cuttness of school? To provide all those needs that everyone individually needs. It’s like a huge undertaking. For me, it’s more about access and opportunity, lack of access and opportunity that we need to fix.

Unfortunately, there is not a cookie-cutter solution to the opportunity gap schools are charged with fixing and which principals are charged with leading. Needs vary from building to building and classroom to classroom, and how schools go about creating more equitable school environments and experiences for all students varies a great deal. While there are common themes and focus within the definitions stated above, the complexity of equity work is very real and challenging for these leaders.
Building Relationships & Feelings of Connectedness (Race, Ethnicity, LGBTQ+, Etc.)

This idea of serving all students was paired with more information about to whom the term all is referring and the relational foundation needed to do equity work. Many of the principals specifically stated they are constantly and purposefully working to form relationships with students of different races, ethnicities, sexual orientation, etc. For some, this was a more obvious statement in that they seemed to understand the complexities of who composes their student population and the challenges of ensuring all voices are heard. For others, it seemed like a work in progress or perhaps something that was new and uncomfortable at first. The principal of High School G, whose school and district seem to be in the earlier phases of equity efforts, shared that he is doing some personal work to broaden his understanding of what it means to serve all students and how to examine his role in doing so. One step was that he and his family participated in a book study reading the text *White Fragility*. He shared how that was a thought-provoking read that has made him think differently on personal and professional levels.

As Principal K, whose school and district has been engaged in equity work for the past decade, shared that it is important to engage students in honest conversations to know how to serve them best:

I think that our purpose in education is probably too lofty sometimes. But you know, think we get caught up too much in the minutia of what program we are doing. What initiative are we trying to, you know, institute? What problem are we trying to solve when really that problem is going to come and go. We just talk to the kids and ask them, ‘What’s gonna work in this situation?’ They’ll usually tell us, and many times they’ll tell us that they could have done more and they will tell us and be really honest about what we could have done better, and as long as we’re willing to listen to that, we can really make some strides on how to support them.

It seemed that Principal K had a solid feel for the ways in which students feel connected to the school and the work that still needs to be done. All of his responses were very student-centered;
from the curriculum to extracurriculars, he works daily with his staff to make a difference in the lives of all of his students. As Principal K later elaborated,

We talk about their development as an individual and a person. We have a lot of influence on that because of the communities we create here. So if you create really strong inclusive communities, where everyone feels their value, then the people, the young people will leave us creating that elsewhere and be really strong. I believe that they live it with us once they get an opportunity to do it [...] I think we all jointly share that responsibility.

Creating this inclusive community within a school fosters feelings of connectedness and allows students to more freely share their insights and feedback about in regard to what extent the schools are meeting their needs. That staff shares in that responsibility only allows for students to feel they are valued by all. Principal A reiterated the importance of “Generating culture and climate [...] If we can establish an environment that everybody wants to be a part of, I believe the sky’s the limit for a building, right? We’ll be able to grow exponentially.” According to these principals, this relational work seems to be the foundation or springboard for any equity work to move forward. Helping students feel like they are part of something bigger and more inclusive allows them to feel safe, heard, and respected and helps the school community grow and flourish.

For some principals, it is not just a personal goal or initiative in connecting with students but something that is an area of focus for an entire district, and therefore, it is specifically stated in a school or district equity plan. Principal P shared how her K-12 district is striving to incorporate all student voices:

We have a comprehensive equity plan in this district where we have some very deliberate, and very focused goals of where we would like this district to be in a few years [...] equity, not only of race, but gender and socioeconomic status. And so we’re putting some things in place with 22 schools in this district. So we’re all a little bit different places depending on how big or smaller schools are and what our demographics are [...] Recognizing and celebrating students and where they’re coming from but also taking a close look at our curriculum. Teachers are being trained in implicit bias and how that impacts their classrooms and then we want to start to really integrate this year. We’re
doing a project that incorporates student voices. In this building, we’re interviewing about a hundred students [...] our LGBTQ+, transgender students, as well as our African American, Asian, Hispanic, we also have a large Muslim population here as well as our white students.

As I walked through Principal P’s building, there were visuals that showed how these voices are being incorporated and celebrated. At the main entrance, there is a courtyard full of pillars with inspirational messages in a multitude of languages. Student pictures line the halls and offices with an array of inclusive quotes and messaging. Principal P also shared how they are working to improve the school communications to families by adding to the range of languages when information is sent home and not just doing so with major school-to-home communication but with all of them to foster more two-way communication with families. It is not just the student population that Principal P worked to foster; she also builds a connectedness with her staff:

   We’ve taken all of our students and our staff, who are not originally from this country, and we’re hanging flags of their country of origin. So that at least they see some piece that represents them. We actually have a large number of staff who were not born in the United States as well, and so they need that recognition just as much as anybody else.

This effort has been well received by both students and staff, reiterates the inclusive messaging that Principal P communicates to all, and works to have her building reflect as well.

   This sense of belonging and inclusiveness was a common theme throughout the entire interview with Principal P. Starting out her teaching and administrative career in an area that was more diverse and had a greater population of students from a low socioeconomic status, she was quickly attuned to the disparities within the educational system. As a special education teacher, she wholeheartedly believed all students can achieve high levels of learning but some might just need different ways to get there. It was obvious that her work, specializing with students who have behavioral disorders, shaped her understanding that the standard structures of school do not work for all kids. At the end of the interview, it was clear how her early classroom
work shaped all that was to follow and created a strong equity mindset, as noted in her previous responses. She recognized that there is no endpoint to equity work and the importance of disrupting structures to serve more student – not just providing the opportunities but also ensuring the impact:

Their support needs and their academic needs are but just really that sense of belonging. When I can look in the stands and see a multitude of students who feel comfortable to be part of the things that we do outside of school as well as the things we do in school. We’re moving in that direction, but we still have a ways to go. And I know that our staff is very cognizant of what we do in the classroom and the things that we use as curriculum to start to break down some of those barriers and give equal voice to our students who are either marginalized or underrepresented.

From curriculum and instruction to athletics and extracurriculars, she knew the complexity and challenges of meeting the needs of all students and that the work is never done. Instead it just keeps building and progressing for all who are involved in it.

Interviewing students and connecting with them informally and formally are just a couple of the ways in which these principals stayed connected to the students in their buildings. A few of the principals referenced their student leadership groups or principal advisory committees. Principal advisory groups in a lot of schools are composed of students across grade levels. Typically, there is some type of application or recommendation process for these students to be considered for the advisory. These students bring their concerns, questions, and insights to the principal. The group allows the principal to connect with students and gather feedback directly from them. Four of the principals noted that over time they noticed the inequities within these groups in that most of the students were high-achieving and White students and not representative of the student body. For that reason, two of the principals did away with these advisory groups. One of the two decided to focus more on the already established affinity groups in his building such as his African American student and parent groups. Two of the other
principals, who talked about these advisory groups, used it as an opportunity to restructure the
group and make it more inclusive and representative of the school’s demographics.

This year, the principal at High School A opened this group up to all of his students and
made sure that not only was it a time of the day when all students could attend, on a late-start day
when teachers are in collaborative groups, but that bus transportation would also be provided.
As part of participating in this group, the students were asked to complete a Google Form, noting
topics of interest. The principal then added a few topics of his own and organized all of them by
month, sometimes planning to invite guest speakers who might be able to provide additional
insight or expertise on those topics. While this is a structure that is new for this principal this
year, he shared that the group is off to a strong start and that not only are there more students
participating than in prior years but the group is more diverse and representative of the school’s
demographics as well.

The High School M principal also spoke about looking at the number of all athletics and
activities and “going to the communities you serve rather than waiting for them to come to you.”
He encouraged his staff to travel to the communities in which their students reside prior to the
start of the school year to start building connections to the school, and he joins his staff in these
efforts. For instance, in the past, High School M hosted an incoming freshman night at the
school. While many in the town attended, they were missing many of the students who are
typically bussed to school outside of that area. As a result, the staff began hosting a freshman
night at the community center near where most of the students who are bussed to school reside.
As Principal M shared:

Getting over into different geographical spaces [...] We don’t do enough of it, but when
we have done that, I think it makes a big statement. Because it’s easy for us to have a lot
of stuff just here in G Town, but we’ve also seen a lot of good traction when we go over to H Town and go to their village center and have an event.

Principal M and his staff used that time to connect with these students and families, to answer questions, and to help the students feel welcomed and familiar with their teachers and school. The principal reported that the results and feedback were great and that they had seen a difference in how their new students feel more connected to and comfortable those first few weeks of school.

One way a principal connected with an individual student that allowed him to further connect with both students and staff occurred at High School W. Principal W had a student approach him about their school mascot the warrior. Through a few conversations with this student, it became clear that over time the mascot was misrepresented not only in what its perceived heritage was said to be but also in how it was received by students. Together Principal W and this student contacted the Potawatomi tribe headquarters, conferred with experts, and started to create a plan to completely rebrand the school’s mascot of over 50 years. As more students became engaged in this work, so did the staff. On opening day of the school year when Principal W shared the progress made with staff, everyone started to applaud, which he said was the first time something like that has happened at a staff meeting in the past 10 years he has been principal. The authentic and genuine connections that grew from this work with the student were empowering and important for all who were involved. It also put all of the talk about inclusiveness and equity into action for many to see and learn from. Especially in the heightened climate of today in regard to mascots and monuments, the fact that so many different people could come together, educate themselves, and move forward for the greater good brought hope and a feeling of accomplishment and connection throughout the building.
Equity Initiatives and Student Impact

One of the equity efforts that three of the four high school principals discussed at length was detracking. For High School M and High School R, detracking lower-level classes had been in place for many years, which raised the academic standards for all students, as exemplified through grades and advanced placement scores. Initially, there were teachers who resisted these efforts, but over time and with data to back the success, this became a common practice in those schools. As Principal A stated: “Yes, there was some pushback. So the whole push with an AP. So we are a school that partners with EOS Equal Opportunity Schools and they come out to identify students who probably should be provided an opportunity to take an AP course.” Using outside companies to facilitate this work created a level of resistance because no matter how a company pitches this idea, it still calls into question that there is something teachers are not doing for students, which upsets teachers who know their students best and take pride in those relationships.

However, over time, all of these principals shared how their population of students taking AP classes increased while maintaining their high levels of scores, earning students college credit. When the data could speak to the success of the move to AP, teachers slowly and cautiously bought into the idea of bridging students into advanced placement courses and started to help support these recruitment efforts. High School M has been recognized by the College Board for this and has been recognized as an AP exemplar school. High School R has placed students into classes without a summer bridge, and based on grade and standardized test data, they have found great success in doing over the course of the past few years.
Principal P is a fourth year principal at High School P. Prior to that she served as an assistant principal and social studies teacher and department chair. Equity has always been close to Principal P’s heart and her work. During the pandemic, she shared it was difficult to bridge the gap with staff in regard to the two political extremes and how they perceived the need for equity work. There were many heated conversations as she tried to find a happy medium and help move their work forward to better serve all students. One of the ways she has tried to do this during her time as principal was to detrack the lower-level classes. Principal P and her team were successful, but there was definitely early resistance, which is still quite powerful. High School P, while no longer offering a lower-level track, is experiencing resistance from some board members and the other high school within the district, High School C, as both high schools are now tasked with aligning their essential standards and curriculum. According to the Principal C, there are board members who may push to have the lower-level track re-implemented because they feel that the district will be lowering their standards by aligning their college preparatory curriculum with their more mixed-ability track of High School P, but according to Principal P, even if the board requires bringing back the lower-level track on paper or through some other mandate, they will not allow anyone in their teacher recommendation process to place any students in that track. One of the stark contrasts she noticed after detracking was not only more racially mixed classes but a decrease in the number of fights, specifically among their African American female population. She also stated that all levels of classes are now more representative of the student population and students and teachers are reporting positive experiences overall with the elimination of the lower-level track. Because of this, Principal P is more determined than ever to move forward even if her own district is fighting against it.
Along the lines of athletics and activities, High School W has looked closely at their enrollment numbers in programs such as their physical education leadership class that focuses on the development of pre-service teachers. Students are recommended by teachers, and there is an application process. The principal noticed how for years only white students applied and were accepted to this course. While his teachers talked about how there is opportunity for any student to apply, he challenged them to diversify those classes and to take extra steps to make sure BIPOC students were represented. Over time, the demographics of those classes have changed as a result of the principal’s encouragement and oversight. Principal M also spoke about looking at the numbers of all athletics and activities and really digging into who each program was serving and who they are not. They have audited many of their programs and been more purposeful in who they recruit and how they not only increase their opportunities for students but also the impact.

In regard to curriculum efforts, five of the principals talked at length about how their English departments have worked to diversify the curriculum and novels at each grade level. Students have shared that they want to see themselves in the curriculum, and research has also shown the impact of making that type of curricular shift to engage all learners. As a result of student voice and professional actions by the teachers, these schools have replaced some of their canonical works with more contemporary and diverse texts, both in the stories that are told and in who is telling them. Some of these curricular shifts were met with community resistance but ended up being approved by the boards. For two of the high schools, this was a significant first step forward on their equity journey; for the other three, this was one of many steps along the way.
Along the lines of board approval, board policy is another way districts can support their equity efforts. In the next couple of years, the superintendent of Township B High School will retire. According to Principal B, he has been an integral proponent of equity work and helped to move it forward throughout the district. Staff is concerned that there is potential for the new superintendent to either provide less support or possibly halt the programs. Because of this concern and uncertainty, the district has taken the next step of adopting board policies in support of equity work to ensure the work will continue when a new superintendent takes on the position. This new policy not only secures the equity focus and vision for the whole district, but because the work is supported as policy at that level, it secures the funding and resource support as well.

Principal B shared High School B’s equity journey over the past few years. In addition to this significant board policy, they have a detailed equity plan that was the result of a full-scale audit process. They even took the next step of rebranding their school’s vision and creating what they call “The B Way,” which outlines their school’s values and core beliefs. As I walked the halls of this building and visited the office spaces, this rebranding was seen in many places through visuals and messaging. Principal B explained how it is used in classrooms and guides the work everyone does. It has created a common language and aligned much of the work they were doing previous to the audit. Part of the creation of The B Way was student and staff driven through multiple feedback sessions. Because of the inclusion of many voices in the creation of this vision, there is buy-in at all levels of the organization and from the community as well.

Resisting the Resistance to Continue Moving Forward

Much has been written about how educational leaders face resistance to equity work. While there are a variety of reasons for this resistance, the reality is that it impacts the school
setting and has the potential to stall or halt progress toward equity. This resistance can come from parents, community, students, and teachers, and sometimes from a combination of all at the same time. It has the potential to slow or halt equity work. Seven of the 13 principals shared how they have directly encountered this resistance, both personally and professionally, and how it has impacted their work. A few offered ways in which they have been able to deal with, or resist it, as well.

High School P District experienced a few situations that prompted a call for equity work and also sparked resistance to it. The issue that prompted a push toward the work dealt with a social media situation in which one student posted a picture of another during lunch and made a comment about buying a slave. This made it to national news coverage, so the call for equity work from some was nationwide. Shortly after, there was a different situation as a result of a guest speaker who was brought in for a teacher Institute Day to help move these equity conversations forward at High School P that prompted a great deal of resistance:

We were a little worried, you know, some of these things have, in our community, become controversial. We brought a guest speaker that people didn’t take too well including our own staff [...] And so it really took the focus off of the intent of what we were doing. And really made it more of a politicized issue. And so it has, on top of everything else, polarized some people in the district with critical race theory, and it’s not just this community, it’s the country.

This event was picked up by news media and created quite a stir not only in the community but outside of it as well. As a result of this speaker being labeled as political and divisive, the district had to take many steps to rectify the situation and move forward. Principal P explained they were trying to move forward with everyone together, but because of this, they had to take a step back and make sure that everyone understood the importance of the work. Without that understanding, the concern was that they would have a repeat of the backlash experienced by the
guest speaker. They were not alone in that, as Principal K shared about a guest speaker experience at their school a few towns over:

So we’ll bring in a guest speaker, right? May push a few buttons, so then I gotta step in and a parent calls and says, ‘I can’t believe you just did this […] Well when are you gonna present the other point of view?’ I said well they get the other point of view every day. Like you get the dominant view all the time[…] So every now and then I get that conversation but not too often.

With both guest speaker examples, resistance was experienced within the school and outside of it, and both principals had to deal with the backlash and help all parties involved move forward. Whether the resistance was from a parent or community group, the principals interviewed spent a lot of time combatting these challenges, which takes away from their many other job responsibilities.

Principal M shared a visual that was representative of the time spent resisting the resistance. About halfway through our interview he mentioned a situation with a teacher who was being released due to a conversation that was recorded by a student bystander and made national news. He retrieved a stack of paper about six inches high from his cabinet, which were all of the emails he received about the issue. Because of the additional influx of phone calls, he had to get a device that would screen calls from outside the local area since he was getting calls from all over the country. After reflecting on the last 15 years of his principalship, Principal M shared that the resistance and involvement from outside of the school building is at its greatest point and that the job has become more exhausting than ever. The political world has taken away from all of the important work they are trying to do as a building for the betterment of their students. Also within this past year, a parent in a neighboring community, who does not have any children attending that school or district, brought media attention to a student-painted rock in their main drive that promoted Black Lives Matter. This rock was painted with the approval of
the school, and while no one in the school community spoke out against it, this outward resistance took countless hours to deal with. In multiple ways, principals like Principal M have become the targets of the resistance and the spokesperson assigned to resist it.

Another neighboring school received similar pushback in regard to integrating new and restorative discipline practices in the school. This leader learned a similar lesson: that it is not only important to share the why but also for everyone to move forward together. As Principal A explained:

So there was a lot of pushback in terms of why is this student still in my class? ...Some people wanted a pound of flesh. So it’s communicating that, hey, we can no longer operate that way [...] I needed to hear what their concerns were. I needed to share what the vision was around it, and why we were doing it. Because I think that’s part of it as well. Everyone is not going to agree with everything that you do, but if you can articulate why I think that goes a long way. And I’ve shared that with my staff. I don’t believe in doing something the same way just because that’s the way we’ve always done it. We’re gonna do what’s best.

This experience reiterated the importance of everyone understanding why changes are made and why there are changes that potentially better serve all students. Sometimes the energy and need for traction around equity work propels it forward at such a pace that others are left behind. While it is human nature to resist change, keeping a system in place just because it has always been in place is not the most sound reason to continue moving forward. That is why an understanding of why change is needed and how it will impact all involved is important for the work to be done well and fully.

Principal E has experienced resistance on multiple levels, primarily and most recently with curriculum and instruction. Their English department is in its second year of evaluating novels and providing language that is supportive of all groups. In the play *Fences*, there is prevalent use of the n-word, so the teachers put together a vocabulary lesson that caused a
negative reaction. He stated that it was a learning opportunity for staff to see that not every student of color, in particular Black students, sees things the same way and that there is still a lot of work to be done. As a result of this, the department chairs are dedicating more professional learning time to these type of discussions and are leading a book study with the work *Cultivating Genius.*

Additionally, Principal E shared that while some resistance is subtle, there is some that is not so subtle. He shared that he has difficulty even referencing culturally responsive teaching, particularly because of people’s political views and responses to critical race theory, which while completely different share the same acronym. Three years ago, staff opted to participate in a book study on *White Fragility,* which also created a lot of negative feelings and pushback. It helped Principal E see more clearly the importance of recognizing and understanding that people’s background experiences can vary greatly. “Thank God that book study is over” was Principal E’s final summation of that situation.

As time has gone on, he has continued to have conversations with staff, students, and community members to help him understand where people are coming from, and he has done a lot of listening. Principal E shared that they may not agree in the end, but they understand and know that he has facilitated honest conversations with them. Modeling how people can disagree in a collegial and professional way has helped staff to feel heard and to show the value in these conversations. It is also a good model for students. Principal E ended by saying that he was raised from a young age to listen to and try to empathize with others. He contended this upbringing has benefited him greatly throughout his career, especially at a time like now when there is so much division in the world that seeps into our schools.
For Principal A, the resistance was referred to more as fear. That people fear the unknown and make assumptions that for some students to get more, others must get less:

Not everyone is ready. The work that needs to be done, but more importantly the outcome of what that work might produce. I think there’s fear that if everyone was provided equal access and opportunities, those that always had the access and opportunities will have less access and opportunities if that makes sense. So I think there’s a fear that people might lose something that they’ve always had. So that makes it challenging. In education, I think we have to get away from how we were educated in the system when we were a student because it’s not the same, right?

This zero-sum game mentality was not only found in this principal’s experiences but is also prevalent in the literature. Principal A speculates that perhaps it is due to parents remembering their experiences as a student and projecting the opportunities they may or may not have received onto their child, worrying their student is going to be left behind. This is a common mindset in parents that principals and school staff are working to combat within and outside of the schools as they try to make schools work better for all students.

While the words fear and resistance have been used to describe the responses from some in regard to equity work, the word roadblocks emerged as well. These findings align with literature related to resistance to equity work due to ignorance or lack of understanding of what the word equity really means. For example, Principal R had this to say about the roadblocks to understanding she has experienced within her building:

We talk so much about equity and I feel like it’s almost too much. What our equity team is working on is developing like some common language, because with everyone having their own definition of equity, it makes it hard for us to move forward because you might think that something’s equitable, but then someone else will say, ‘Well, no, it’s not because of this’, You know? And it’s interesting. It’s just that everyone has a different philosophy. Almost so it kind of presents some roadblocks to the work moving forward.

It seems like the back and forth she has experienced with these language differences regarding understanding have worn on her as well as indicated when she agrees that equity might be talked
about too much and that perhaps there is even truth to having varied definitions of equity because we all bring a different set of experiences to the table. It is difficult to move the work forward when no one has a clear and common understanding of what it is and how to do it. Principal M admitted to this lack of clarity about its meaning as well:

Equity is hard by itself. I sometimes struggle with that word because I don’t know what it means. I’ve seen different attempts at defining it, but I think I attach it to some other abstract nouns like access, belonging, and opportunity. And equity is your attempt at providing those things at the same level that other kids have.

As leaders struggle to define what equity means, it is not surprising that their staff may be in a similar place or that the work, at times, lacks focus or direction due to the gaps in understanding. Later in his interview, Principal M had this to say about creating a common understanding and helping to move the work forward:

It’s really tricky you know? Because I’m a white guy from Oak Park, right? And so I’ve had a different experience. And so I have an equity coordinator who partners with me on this. One of the things that we do to create that awareness is put those kids in front of our staff whenever we can so we’ll have them at some point do a presentation. And I feel like the staff is always responsive to that. You want to be careful because you don’t want it to be like this is another thing you did wrong, it needs to be like what works for us.

Finding what works for schools is more complicated than what it seems. Some districts have created equity director positions to support schools and leaders with this work. In the example just provided, they are learning together to move forward and are partnering with others when the path forward is not as clear about how to move it forward on a much larger scale.

To help clarify this definition for all and clear up misunderstandings that can perpetuate resistance, some principals have found it helpful to get staff to visualize what the work really looks like and how they can help in moving it forward. Principal K suggested a way to move the conversation beyond the definition and to help staff envision what the work looks like and where to start:
You look at, are they participating beyond the classroom? Are they participating in the classroom? How are they academically achieving, and how are they participating? And that’s again, another administrative data point, but it provides that conversation piece with the staff to validate the work they’re doing. So I think those are the ways that you can talk about equity in a language that helps people understand. Here’s what we mean by outcomes of that environment, not just the programs we do.

The focus on outcomes has helped his staff understand not only what the end goal looks like for this work but also helps them to plan for how students should get there. As Principal M noted, it is important to look at the numbers and data points, as that is one way to know if progress is being made and to identify gaps.

In trying to bring together a wide range of thoughts and experiences in regard to equity work, some leaders have started by meeting their staff where they are. Another suggestion to move resistant staff and staff as a whole forward came from Principal P:

And so, just like we do with kids, we should meet our staff where they are instead of making them jump into the middle of the deep end. Yeah and so that didn’t go over so well, so this year we’re really kind of differentiating [...] If you’re here, we’re gonna push everybody and challenge them. But we really are starting where we can differentiate to levels of comfort and then move them into some discomfort and continue to move forward. Again this is not a one-stop or one shot. It’s going to have to be over multiple years, and it has to be something that’s embedded in what we do. What we do with kids every day, the curriculum that we use, the novels that we expose them to and so on. So it’s going to be a multi-year process. We have to go back and fix some things that we did.

When teachers prepare for a lesson, they take into account the ability levels and needs of the students in their room. Principal P suggests that schools are now tasked with taking a similar approach with their staff in regard to equity work and knowing that this can happen in just one moment in time. Instead the process must be ongoing and comprehensive, especially to correct the times when the work moved too fast and left some staff behind. Even though Principal P shared that they have backpedaled a little bit, moving forward, she is working to keep her staff focused on what is best for all students:
It’s not about how you feel politically. It’s about what is best for kids. So that the optimum environment for their learning can take place here regardless of what they look like or what language they speak. How they identify those things are irrelevant. If our structure is strong enough in the foundation so that all kids have what they need at the time they need. And so we’ve kind of gotten back on that path a little bit.

It is not easy work, but it is work that now seems to be moving forward because staff is moving forward together with a focus on how their school can provide optimal learning experiences for all students when they need it. The pandemic slowed this work for a number of schools and prompted many to start over with their equity efforts. Principal S shared how the pandemic has impacted his school specifically:

We already lost a year and a half of focus. We did some things but it wasn’t the same on zoom. And when you’re talking about these kinds of things you can’t do it through zoom, you can’t do a large group discussion about this on zoom and so in some regards where we’ve frozen in 2019 or even back to 2018, where our progress was. So you just have to stay the course and now I don’t know about you guys, but we have the CRT police coming to our board meetings and calling our equity work CRT. I had never heard that term until about four months ago.

The merging of the resistance to equity work, heightened by the political climate and pandemic, amplified and complicated equity work for a lot of school leaders. The idea of taking a step back and slowing the pace of progress and work seems to be a common experience for many. Once again, principals are having to take on more of the issues in the outside world and all of the varying opinions and beliefs that come along with them.

For those principals who stated they had not personally faced resistance to equity work, the reasons varied. One referenced that the previous leader faced more of the resistance. Another principal stated that he has not personally faced resistance either but acknowledged it has recently become more difficult to keep the competing interests of the outside world out of the school. After examining the equity efforts of those who faced resistance and those who stated they had not, it seems that when leaders and schools try to make changes and create new systems
and structures they face the most resistance. If building relationships and trying to create an inclusive foundation in one’s school is the first or only step at that place in time, the resistance is a lot less.

Principal S at High School S, who expressed that he has not experienced much resistance, had this to say in regard to his own experience and dealing with those who question equity efforts:

I wouldn’t call it outright resistance, but I noticed the reluctance or the poo-pooing of it. People asked why we’re doing this. I treat all my kids the same, and I know that’s the point. You shouldn’t treat them all the same because they’re not the same. That’s part of the education process. Just like the kids, our teachers are all in different places of their understanding and admittedly I had a lot to learn. I grew up in a very homogeneous environment and until I went away to college, I didn’t experience much diversity and so I had to learn. And so, I’ve gone through all the formal training too, and had to look at my own experiences, which has been great.

Getting people to examine their own experiences and understand more about the experiences of others is one of the hurdles to this work. As this principal has experienced both personally and professionally, there is work to be done and learning that needs to take place. With everyone in a different place, finding common ground or understanding can be challenging, and equity work is no exception to that challenge.

Principal M shared that some of their resistance was greater in the past when they were bridging students into advanced placement classes. Because that work has been in place for a number of years with multiple data points to measure the progress and success of their programming, the resistance has subsided: “So I haven’t really had any resistance. We’re beyond resisting integrating our AP classes. We’re beyond that [...] we’ve sort of fought that fight. It’s now just what we do. That used to be a pressure point.” He further elaborated that the resistance they get now is because they are trying to do so much equity work and the amount of
work is too much. He suggested that it needs to be teamed out and the district needs to focus on perhaps just three things at a time. This being his last year before retirement, he concluded this conversation about resistance with this final thought: “You know, it’s good to be the principal and be the leader. But you’re only as good as the structures you build around. You want to build something that’s going to be there after you leave.” Principal M is proud of the equity work he has participated in for decades. His hope is that the work continues after he is gone and that the structures remain in place for students for years to come because as he and most of the other principals noted in the interview, there is no end to equity work.

Two of the principals in the early phases of equity work in their buildings acknowledged resistance but stated had personally not faced much. That is perhaps because they have been moving at a slower pace compared to other principals and are in the initial phases of their equity work. Because of this, both principals shared that they are keeping these conversations focused on their buildings and have not tried to engage their communities in equity work. The principal of High School J said they are not broadcasting to their community, which she admitted has resistant groups, but are just making adjustments to their curriculum and starting the conversations about equity with their staff and on a departmental level. In High School G, the principal shared that prior to this year, equity work was more of a grassroots effort from the English department and focused around bringing in more diverse choice texts. This was the first year the district started any type of equity training in the form of examining one’s own personal experiences leading to bias. He stated that the training was well received and a first step that many were pleased with. However, neither school has talked about disrupting any structures or programming. Instead they are focusing on building relationships to create a more inclusive
culture. This messaging does not seem to bring the controversy or backlash other schools have experienced.

No matter what level of resistance is experienced, Principal K shared some thoughts that help put the situation into perspective: While it is important to listen to all voices, it is also important to not let the resistant voices of a few dictate the work for the whole. With any type of school initiative that is met with pushback, if a few parents called to complain, you would not backtrack based on just those few, which is sometimes less than 1% of the total school population. It is important to keep perspective, be open minded and listen, and not make rash decisions based on the emotional voices of a few individuals. He said sometimes we are too quick to react and need to make sure we listen and process before responding to resistance at any level.

Possible Endpoint

One of the final questions was “How do you try to create a more equitable school environment for all students, and how will you know when you get there.” As the principals talked through this idea, the possible end point became clearer. For some, it was the removal of all barriers, as Principal K suggested though the following:

The difference between equality and equity is really what are the barriers that are there for kids? So I do love the newest images where you see the fences actually down, you know, it’s like, Why do we even have a fence type of concept? So it’s interesting as we go forward. Helping folks understand you can have a large school and you can still personalize it. Every kid feels like they belong.

Over the course of the past few years, the students standing near the fence have become symbolic of what equity means. What is interesting about that image is how it has been altered over time with the inclusion of justice and later with the removal of the fence. Just that changing
of the imagery shows how the understanding of equity work has evolved and how the understanding of what it means for individuals and systems has changed, too. While Principal P agrees with removal of the barriers, her response varied in that it will be the students who will tell us when we get there: “When the students tell us, we’re getting there when they are comfortable and have a good experience and have access to everything [...] all the barriers are gone to their needs and their support.” The end point is still elusive in some ways in that it is difficult to imagine what removal of all barriers look like and how we will know with certainty, even with feedback from students, if they truly have access to all of their needs and support.

A response to this question that encapsulates both ideas and more directly addresses the question was shared by Principal R:

It’s never ending. We will never get to a point where we say, okay, everything’s equitable now. I mean, there’s inequities that exist in every area of an organization like a public school. I mean, they’re systemic, they’re built into the bricks of the school, you know? So it’s gonna take a long time, and it’s not going to happen before I retire. But yeah, it doesn’t stop us addressing it. We keep looking to change things that we can, and what’s within our locus of control. And as administrators, you know, you have more control over those types of things. You’ve got to think about how you can influence those teachers to do the work. But yeah, we have more control and power, the higher we get, right? So you have to think about bigger things that you want to try to make more equitable.

For schools that search for definitive answers to questions and programs to catch all, the idea that there is no endpoint to equity work and that the progress needed to make schools work for all students may not even be seen in our lifetime is hard to grapple with. That is why this work is challenging, resistant, and the most important work schools can do if they are truly working for all students.
Conclusion

According to these high school principals, achieving equity in schools means serving all students by helping them reach their fullest potential and differentiating the support needed to do it fully and well. The general consensus from these administrators was that there is no endpoint to this work and that all members of a school community need to engage in equity work to have the greatest impact. It is not a job that one person, one principal, or one group of people can do on their own. The variety in these principals’ responses was in the ways and extent to which each principal strived to achieve equity and the responses received from stakeholders. Some principals tried to move too fast and lost staff along the way. Their reflections centered on a need to start over and move at a slower pace to bring more people along with this work. The initial fast pace left some staff frustrated and feeling that it was a personal or political agenda moving this work forward. With other principals, the work did not move beyond the relational student-school connectedness level and did not delve into specific efforts to either differentiate support for students to equalize access to opportunities in the form of programming, resources, etc. In part, this could have been due to a principal’s incomplete understanding of what equity in schools should, or could, look like or an uncertainty of how the work will be received by others. When principals believed – and explicitly stated – that equity is the heart of their work, they were better able to target, implement, support, and lead equity initiatives in collaboration with others to make their schools more equitable. As previously noted, the principals all recognized this is a team effort. Not one principal responded that they were the sole leader of this work. Even when they acknowledged that their role greatly influences the culture and climate of a building, they knew that this work has many layers and must be a collaborative effort. No matter
the level of understanding, the principals were working to define what this work looks like personally and professionally and were trying to examine how all aspects of their organization can be viewed through an equity lens. As for all people on this equity journey, it seems that the more one grows in their knowledge about equity work, the more they realize how much there is to learn and that there is no end point to the learning or work. About half of the principals commented on the complexity of the job and how if a few could do it over again, they would have reconsidered the principalship and stayed in the classroom. These principals recognized they can only do so much, that the current responsibilities are too much, and that they need more support to move equity work forward.

In addition to the multifaceted and demanding job as the principal, dealing with the resistance to equity work is also difficult and exhausting, and some have fought the resistance by pushing the work forward in spite of it. However, others have succumbed to the resistance at times by trying to meet those individuals where they are at and to move forward with them rather than without, compromising the impact of the equity efforts. A few of the principals kept their work at the relational level, getting to know students and helping them feel welcome and respected.

It was when systems were altered or disrupted that there was a flare up with the resistance, and perhaps some of those principals did not have the energy, or capacity, to deal with the resistance. As some principals stated, understanding the resistance and trying to work with and within certain aspects of it can help move it forward in a way that embraces all stakeholders and has a greater impact. When these principals understood that resistance to equity work is a part of the work, they were better able to be proactive and not let it dismantle their efforts.
Others succumbed to the resistance. Some principals were more skilled at looking at their data and demographics and their representation in all academic and extracurricular programs to make each facet of their school more representative of their population of students. These principals explicitly talked about the impact within their data that showed progress and then shared stories about students who were provided opportunities past systems and practices did not afford to them. For instance, their advanced placement and academic programming was not tracked and was representative of their demographics so the success in those programs could not be connected to race or class. Those who stayed at the relational level did not talk about the data and did not have those specific student testimonials to share. Instead they focused on the importance of valuing all students on a personal level and making sure they feel accepted and connected to a school by expanding club offerings and providing more opportunities for student voice. However, there was no talk of the differentiated support need to equalize opportunities and minimize gaps. While this relational piece is an important step and is foundational to this work, it is only a starting point.

From the literature and testimonials of these principals, it is clear that equity work is complicated and complex. It is also worthwhile and is truly at the heart of education and what it means to serve all students. Equity work forces individuals to reflect on their own practices, beliefs, and biases, which is not an easy feat. Some principals have acknowledged and accepted that challenge, while others are not there yet. This not-there-yet mindset was either explicitly stated or it was implicit in their inability to articulate what the work looks like beyond forming relationships with students. If one could not share specific examples of how to differentiate supports or programming in a school, then they fell into this latter category of not being there yet. The effort and heart put into their jobs was not the issue. Instead some seemed worn down
or unsure of what steps to take. With some of them, the desire to pursue equity was there, but there was not as much action that followed. And if the school leader is uncertain or unsure of the steps, then it is challenging to build the coalition and support to see it through and make an impact.

Nothing is easy about principalship and leading equity work. Leading and serving all students was not an easy job pre-pandemic, and it was further complicated during the pandemic. Schools used to feel like they could shut out the outside world and just teach, and those days seem to be over. It is a multifaceted and demanding job that cannot be everything to everyone. However, the job of schools is to impact all students, and equity is the path to get there, which means there will be people who are disappointed by a school’s action or inaction in regard to this work. Thus the goal and hope of serving all students becomes more complicated and unclear.

The literature and experiences of these principals point a need for coalition building, community support, and professional development. Creating an equity director position in a district where one person is expected to fill these gaps is unrealistic and far from enough. And just as there is no endpoint with equity work, there will be no endpoint in leaders’ need to learn how to navigate the challenges both inside and outside of their buildings, to build strong relationships with students and staff, and to do all they can with the limited control they have. That is the job, and if a principal can continue to learn and foster an equity mindset, then they can work alongside all parts of the organization to do their best to serve all students within it.
The Regional Office of Education (ROE) offers professional development opportunities for educators and leaders at all levels. For administrators, there is a principal collaborative that is a year-long professional learning group composed of principals, primarily at the high school level, spanning across DuPage County. Participation in this group provides principals with administrator academy credit, which is required on a yearly basis to renew administrator certifications. The group is co-facilitated by two principals: Matt Biscan, Wheaton North High School; and Jason Stipp, Waubonsie Valley High School. These two leaders plan and facilitate monthly meetings, invite guest speakers and provide timely topics for the group to learn and grow. According to these leaders, the strength of this group is being able to support each other through collaboration, sharing ideas, and mentorship. There are principals who are in their first year of the principalship spanning to those in their last year. An ROE representative, a retired high school principal, oversees this committee, ensuring regular participation and professional learning. She also serves as a great resource for the group as needed. Over the years, the group has grown from 10 participants to more than 30 who attend on a regular basis. Leaders from outside of DuPage have started joining based on recommendations and the reputation of the group. The schools represented vary greatly with their demographics; while most are suburban
schools, all of them have a wide range of needs and service a multitude of communities. These meetings alternate between in person and virtual and typically last about one and a half to two hours.

For the principal interview component of my study, 10 of the 13 principals are members of this principal collaborative. In designing this professional learning plan, I brainstormed a list of topics and possible activities to engage this audience of principals who opted to participate in professional learning through this group. Since my principal is one of the leaders of it, I met with him to talk through the topics and ideas and to narrow my focus. His initial response was that the information shared needs to have immediate impact and to work in schools; principals want applicable strategies that they can bring back and start implementing. With that, we used that focus to the 90-minute session designed below. Members of this group like to share and talk, and they like to work through and problem solve situations together. They are also especially interested in hearing success stories from other schools and those that were not as successful, so they can learn from both. Therefore, this plan takes into consideration this principal’s input and feedback, adding information that sets up the context for the discussion and thoughts for future reflection and consideration. The design of this lesson is for an in-person meeting.

To start this presentation (see Table 2 for an outline), especially as one who has no experience in their roles, I plan to take a couple of minutes to acknowledge the complexity and impact of their job, especially heightened in the time of the pandemic. Based on my interview experience, I am assuming most of these principals are also focusing on equity in their schools and trying to create welcoming and inclusive school cultures. Therefore, the presentation starts with a brief shared definition of equity, what it means to look at equity within schools, and how
there is research to support the growing resistance that most have experienced moving equity work forward. This three-minute overview will help frame the conversation and provide consistency in language and focus throughout.

Table 2
Leading for All: Professional Development Plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>Need to serve all students</td>
<td>2-3 min</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All job responsibilities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leadership quotes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact of Principal</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>COVID-19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Framing the Conversation</td>
<td>Definition of Equity</td>
<td>3-4 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Equity of What?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resistance to Equity Work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Purpose: Impact &amp; Applicable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Study</td>
<td>Read Berkley case study (10 minutes)</td>
<td>20 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Small Group discussion (10 minutes)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What happened? Why did it happen? What steps could have changed the outcome?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Did these actions create a more equitable school environment or greater inequities?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Full-Group Discussion</td>
<td>Good intentions</td>
<td>10 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Plans in place</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Met with resistance</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Minimized Impact</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher &amp; Leader Mindsets</td>
<td>Quotes</td>
<td>5 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chart</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff Capacity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List Activity</td>
<td>Foresee Resistance/Consider Mindset</td>
<td>20 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Plan Next Steps</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of Equity Directors</td>
<td>Principal Feedback</td>
<td>3 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Suggested Support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources &amp; Reflection</td>
<td>Share Resources</td>
<td>20 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time to read and reflect with a partner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Comments &amp; Feedback</td>
<td>Brief summary of key points</td>
<td>10 min</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Getting your mind right and ready</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Google Feedback/Reflection Form</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Since the goal is to have principals bring back applicable strategies by aligning action to research, the first activity involves individually reading and processing a situation that took place in Berkeley, California, where a well-intentioned group of leaders and educators recognized an inequity in the school and identified the group of students it negatively impacted the most. They then created a plan to remove this barrier and to provide more support to those students, so in the end, all of the students would have equal access to higher-level science programming and support. However, this plan did not play out as intended. Teachers in the school and community members outside of the school teamed up to fight this initiative. After an exhausting and laborious process and negotiation, the end result was a compromise that created slightly more equity for some, while creating another level of inequity for others. The case study will probably take approximately 10 minutes for each principal to read on their own. Following those 10 minutes, they will select groups of three to four people to process the following questions: What happened? Why did it happen? What steps could have changed the outcome?

After a 10-minute small group discussion, one member of each group will share salient points in response to those questions. I will then take a couple of minutes to show how the research supports that the Berkeley study is similar to equity work initiatives that take place across the country and, most likely, in their schools as well. That learning how to think like the resistance and plan for it, as a first step in any process, will help to attain the desired outcome of that initiative. Then I will briefly share some recent research about the importance of teachers and leaders having an equity mindset to move any equity work forward and emphasize that some research suggests it may be the most important characteristic one should have. Mindset will be briefly discussed and then coupled with planning for the resistance piece to examine a list of initiatives (taken from the principal interviews) that have been implemented with varying
degrees of success. The principals will then work in new small groups to talk through an activity that asks them to use this new information and plan as if they were to implement these initiatives in their buildings in the near future. Hopefully, talking through these examples with that information will provide new insights and strategies that are helpful in leading this type of work, especially in the role of principal.

After this activity, each group will share on an assigned initiative to avoid repetition of comments and to expedite the sharing process. As we progress through each example with the full group, members are welcome to share any new ideas in regard to that initiative that were not discussed with the group assigned. After that debriefing, we will come back together as a group for some final considerations and thoughts shared through the interview process in regard to leading this work (confidentiality maintained), leading this work in a pandemic, and the roles/experiences with equity that could provide more benefit and support for administrators. Finally, the last 10 to 15 minutes will involve individual reflections through a Google Form and time to peruse some of the shared resources/articles. Feedback and insights collected through this form will help to guide and inform future sessions.
REFERENCES


Background questions
1. Please tell me about the work and life experiences that led you to be a high school principal.
2. What positions have you held prior to your current principal position at this school?
   a. [Probes if not mentioned] What were the communities and student bodies like where you taught?
3. How did these experiences shape your view of education and school leadership?

Purpose of education
4. What do you believe is the purpose of education?
5. When we think about kids learning in school, there is fairly broad agreement that some of the responsibility is the student’s and family’s and some of it is the school’s. However, people hold different perspectives on how much each ought to be held responsible for student learning. Some people believe that the responsibility of education is more on the individual’s or student’s while others think it’s more on the society or the school’s. When you think about this spectrum, how much of this is the student’s responsibility and how much is the school’s responsibility?
   a. [Follow up if necessary] Ask for a percentage.

View of leadership - acting as solitary leader (great person theory) or guiding a team towards a goal (distributed leadership theory)?
6. What is the role of the principal in terms of leading the building towards achieving the vision of the school?
   a. [Follow-up if necessary] Could you talk me through how you would approach leading your building to implement a new program or initiative?
   b. [Follow-up] How do you work with teachers, students, staff, and the community in making this vision a reality?

Equity-focused questions
7. Equity has been a growing focus in schools over the past few years. What does equity in education mean to you?
8. How do you plan to create a more equitable school environment for all students, and how will you know when you get there?
9. How have you been successful in implementing equity initiatives?
10. Have you experienced any resistance in the implementation of equity initiatives?
11. If so, what have been the most effective ways that you have responded to this resistance?
12. Any other experiences or thoughts about leading equity work in schools?
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW STRUCTURE
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Method:</strong></th>
<th>Qualitative</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8-10 High School Principals in predominantly white, suburban schools</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-60 minute interviews from August - September</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>